

# *Freewriting with Purpose*

Simple classroom techniques to help students make connections, think critically, and construct meaning



Karen Filewych

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think critically, and construct meaning

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Pembroke Publishers Limited

*To Kevin and Ken:  
For your unconditional love and support*

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# 1

## First Things First

*“Fill your paper with the breathings of your heart.”*

— William Wordsworth

I have heard the term *freewriting* used in different ways to mean different things. For many, freewriting implies that our students are free to write whatever they want. Freewriting, however, is much more than that. In this chapter I explore what the process of freewriting entails, its potential in the classroom, and the most common questions I receive about it.

### What is freewriting?

Perhaps the most important component of freewriting is that we write continuously: we begin with a prompt and keep our pen or pencil moving throughout the duration of the freewrite. We do not stop to question or censor ourselves; we do not write what we think someone else wants to hear; we write what comes to mind generated by the prompt. We do not concern ourselves with spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or grammar — all of that will come in time. As Peter Elbow (1998) describes, we separate the creative and critical processes: we do not let the critical thoughts creep into our freewriting time.

### Prompt-Based Writing

How do we write continuously? How do we teach our students to do this? The key is the prompt. After much experimentation, I have realized that a two-word prompt is most effective at the beginning: “I wish ...,” “Today I ...,” or “I remember ...” If we or our students get *stuck*, we simply write the prompt again and put down the first thing that comes to mind. The rewriting of the prompt is vital to ensure that our pens or pencils keep moving. Although Elbow speaks about an open-ended process, one in which we write whatever comes to mind, I find the use of a prompt essential to keep my students’ pens and pencils moving. Eventually, students may be comfortable with a visual prompt such as a picture or a video, but even then, I provide a prompt of a few words. This practice ensures success for all. Instead of sitting with “nothing to write,” students rewrite the prompt and persist. Lo and behold, it works! Students can write continuously.

I appreciate Linda Rief’s work on quickwrites. Although freewriting and quickwrites are similar in some ways, there are also important differences. In her book *The Quickwrite Handbook*, Rief (2018) defines a quickwrite as this: “a first draft response to a short piece of writing, usually no more than one page of poetry or prose, a drawing, an excerpt from a novel or a short picture book” (3). Her quickwrites always use a mentor text as a starting point for student writers. As you will see, freewriting does not.

## How do we begin?

Before I introduce the idea of freewriting — no matter the students' age — I engage in a discussion about how students *feel* about writing. I begin by asking, “Who likes to read?” Typically, many hands go up. Then I ask, “Who likes to write?” Often, especially with older students, some of those hands go down, or the students give me a so-so gesture. And that's when we explore the reasons *why*. I ask, “So, what don't you like about writing?” Common answers tend to surface:

“I'm not a good writer.”

“I don't know *what* to write.”

“I don't know how to spell.”

“I'm afraid of making mistakes.”

“I have nothing to say.”

“I don't want anyone to read my writing.”

Although the wording may be different, these answers — and the sentiments behind them — emerge regardless of the age of the students. Most often, the answers reflect a lack of confidence in their abilities. And while this discussion saddens me somewhat because I realize the current reality of classroom writing, I am always eager to introduce freewriting to students, knowing the impact it will have on both their abilities and their attitudes.

After we discuss our feelings towards writing, I explain we are going to try a method of writing that will help them get words on paper without worrying about mistakes, spelling, or ideas. I even explain how we will try to separate our creative and critical thinking brains for this process.

I use the prompt “I remember ...” for their first freewriting experience as it tends to be most effective in engaging them in the process. After all, we all remember something!

## How long do we freewrite?

Regardless of the age of my students, the first freewriting experiences tend to be between five and seven minutes long. This time frame may seem surprisingly short, but I want to ensure that the first few experiences are positive. For everyone. Pushing the time frame longer can lead to frustration or feelings of failure if students can't keep their pencils or pens moving. I set a stopwatch on my phone (counting up, not down) to keep beside me. Because I am writing with my students, I keep an eye on both the stopwatch and the students. If I see a few students slowing down, I may quietly remind the group, “Keep your pencils moving.” Or, I'll tell them, “Rewrite the prompt if you get stuck.” When we get past six minutes, I observe the energy in the room. If most students are still writing furiously (or even moderately), I will persist. If more than a couple are slowing down, I will give a warning, “Okay, writers. Let's push through for one more minute.”

### Read the Room

Over time, as students become accustomed to the process and as I get to know them, I will increase the writing time, if only by a minute or two each time. But we never get to a point where students find the amount of time painful. “You have to write long enough to get tired and get past what's on top of your mind. But not so long that you start pausing in the midst of your writing,” advises Elbow (1998,

I also share this with students:  
*Even though I like to write, I still find it difficult and challenging; it is an ongoing learning process.*

51). You may find that some prompts better engage a particular group on a given day than others. If the goal is to help students experience success with writing, we must read the room. We can push longer if they are engaged, but we should stop sooner if they seem to be slowing.

Although this writing time is short, think about a typical writing assignment you give to your students. Have they even started putting pen to paper within six or seven minutes? Some, yes, but certainly not all of them. That initial time after an assignment is given is often pencil-sharpening time, bathroom time, drink-of-water time: avoidance! With freewriting, however, students will have a surprising amount of writing on their pages within six or seven minutes.

## **Why do I write with my students and urge you to do so, too?**

As you may have noticed, I write with my students. Part of what makes this process successful is that we, as teachers, engage in the writing process. This thought gives many teachers immediate anxiety. Stay with me. If we expect our students to make themselves vulnerable through writing, then we should be willing to write with them. Just like our students, many teachers, too, feel that they are not strong writers. But sincerely I tell you, if you are willing to take the risk, you will notice several advantages of engaging in this process with your students.

The first benefit of writing with students is that it sets the tone for the freewrite. Some students want our attention when they want it. But when students see us writing, they realize this isn't the time for questions or washroom breaks: this is the time to write. *Everyone* is writing. Immediately they learn to honor the time. For those of us who teach the younger students, we know the most common question during writing time is "How do you spell ...?" Before we begin, I say to my students: "Can you ask me how to spell something while we are writing? No, because I will be busy writing, too. Do your best and keep going." It works!

The second benefit of writing with students is that they will realize that their writing and ours does not have to be perfect or brilliant as we put pen to paper. Recognizing that writing begins raw and rough is important for students to understand. Writing is thinking. Writing is a craft that requires work for all of us. I certainly wouldn't want the first draft of this manuscript published: it is rough, sometimes stream-of-consciousness, random thoughts that still require much revision and time. When I show or read my own freewriting, students understand that what I am sharing is first thoughts: first thoughts that can be improved upon later, if I choose. That is a freeing concept.

The third benefit of writing with students is that we become learners together. I can say to my students with sincerity, "When I was writing today ..." or "When I wrote this piece, I noticed ..." When we write, too, we truly become engaged in the learning process along with our students. Just as students appreciate it when we play soccer alongside them in physical education class, they also appreciate it when we read and write, take risks, and learn alongside them.

## **Understanding from Within**

Still not convinced? Donald Graves and Penny Kittle (2005) quote Donald Murray in their book *Inside Writing*:

Teachers should write, first of all, because it is fun. It is a satisfying activity that extends both the brain and the soul. It stimulates the intellect, deepens the experience of living, and is good therapy. Teachers should write so they understand the process of writing from within. They should know the territory intellectually and emotionally: how you have to think to write, how you feel when writing. Teachers of writing do not have to be great writers, but they should have frequent and recent experience in writing. If you experience the despair, the joy, the failure, the success, the work, the fun, the drudgery, the surprise of writing you will be able to understand the composing experiences of your students and therefore help them understand how they are learning to write. (p. 1, DVD viewing guide)

Take the plunge: write with your students!

## What about sharing our work?

Younger students tend to read their writing out loud, but quietly; older students read their work silently.

“Students, just like all the rest of us, are more likely to stay involved in an activity if they have some control over what takes place” (Daniels, Bizar, and Zemelman 2001, 87).

As I said, I give my students a warning as we come to the end of our writing time: “Okay, writers. Let’s push through for one more minute.” At the end of this minute, I say: “Grade 4 writers, please finish the sentence you are on and then quietly read your work to yourself.” I build this routine into every freewrite experience. After we have all read our work quietly to ourselves, I give students the options of sharing *all*, *some*, or *none* of the writing out loud. I, as the teacher, have the same options. This choice to share or not is critical in the success of freewriting in your classroom: having this control liberates students during the writing process. They are not worried about censoring themselves or someone reading their work; therefore, their writing is truly more spontaneous and less inhibited. I am careful to keep the promise of letting students share *all*, *some*, or *none* of their work, respecting their choices on each particular day.

## How to Model Thinking about Sharing

To help establish an appropriate environment and tone for our sharing time, I find it effective to model my own thought process for sharing my work. Depending on what I have written, I might say:

- “Today using our prompt, I wrote about three different things: the first day of school, my dog, and my brother. Today I’m going to read you the part about my brother.”
- “Today I wrote about my dad’s illness. It’s quite personal and I’ve decided not to share my writing this morning.”
- “Today I wrote about the day my dad died. I’m going to share it with you and I know everyone will be respectful.”

In the first example, I might also explain that if I was going to work on this piece as something to be published, I wouldn’t have to include the whole freewrite; I would take this part about my brother, revise it, and likely add to it. Students will see that my thoughts moved from idea to idea during my freewrite and understand that that’s *okay*. This conversation is nonthreatening and effective because it is about my writing.

When I share writing that is somewhat personal or emotional, students are always incredibly sensitive and respectful. This sharing sets the tone for the

inevitability of a student sharing an experience such as this. I want them to know it is acceptable not to share if they do not feel comfortable; I also want them to know that they are in a safe environment if they do decide to share something painful or personal.

### How to Go About Sharing

Chapter 2 discusses the process of sharing in more detail.

Although I model my thought process for deciding whether I want to share a certain piece of writing, I encourage my students not to say anything before reading their work out loud to the class. Some students tend to justify or apologize for the quality of their work or the fact that they may not have “finished.” I remind them there is no need for an apology: we all realize that they have spent only six or seven minutes writing this piece. Some students want to talk about what they wrote *instead* of reading their writing out loud. Right from the beginning, I set the expectation that we are not talking *about* our writing but *reading* it out loud.

### Can students use computers or tablets during a freewrite?

I have experimented with freewriting on digital devices, sometimes having students use them during their first freewriting experience and sometimes after students are familiar with the process. As much as I love technology, in this situation, the device gets in the way of the process. Students tend to write less and there is more of a temptation to stop and correct what they are writing. That separation between the creative and critical processes of the brain becomes more difficult when using technology: the computer literally alerts us to our mistakes.

### A Preference for Paper

Initially, therefore, I prefer that during a freewrite, all students write on paper. There is something more physical and more personal about the pen-to-paper experience. Typically, too, pen to paper is faster for many of our students who have not yet mastered the skill of typing. I know that the creative, authentic, emotional part of my brain works better on paper. And most students, even in this digital age, have shared this preference as well.

If and when your students decide to revise and edit a freewrite, they can then use the computer or tablet to work on their pieces further. Technology has its place. After all, I cannot imagine writing, revising, and editing this manuscript without my computer.

If, in time, you notice a student who, you think, would benefit from freewriting on a device, invite that student to try it. If the experience is positive, allow this individual to continue using the device. But keep in mind, in all the years I have taught freewriting, only a few students have chosen a device, and those who did had fine motor challenges preventing their hands from keeping up with their brain.

For a select few over the years, I have also found success using dictation software.

## Do we assess freewriting?

As teachers, we sometimes avoid giving writing assignments, knowing it means another mountain of papers to take home and assess over the weekend. We also tire of reading stacks of student writing all on the same topic: stories, essays, or papers that our students think we want to hear. I know. I used to be one of those teachers.

One unexpected benefit of the process of freewriting is that the writing I am now assessing is much more interesting to read. Student personalities and their writing voices become more evident through this process. Instead of reading 25 pieces on the same thing, I am reading 25 pieces that are unique and enjoyable to read. And I certainly don't assess everything my students write, which they do almost daily. I had to learn to give myself permission to drop that guilty feeling of not assessing (or reading) everything they write.

### Assessment in Moderation

If we were to assess every freewrite our students wrote, we would take away the freedom, intensity, and even the necessary randomness this process allows. Students would then again be worried about what they write as they are writing it. We would defeat the purpose of the entire process. If we *are* going to assess students' freewriting, we give them choice about which piece to submit and provide the opportunity for them to revise and edit their work. We never assess freewriting in its initial raw form.

## What about conventions?

My students are always surprised (and delighted) when I tell them that I don't want them to worry about perfect spelling, punctuation, capitalization, or grammar during freewriting. That's not to say we avoid it or deliberately exclude it; we simply do not worry about it. If I don't know how to spell something, I try my best and move on.

I always ask my students, "Do you think that I think conventions are important?" They always know the answer: "Yes!" Conventions *are* important but not yet. Students get their ideas down on paper first (the creative process) and if they decide to publish their writing, they have time to edit their work for conventions later (the critical thinking process). I remind them that we are going to turn our critical thinking brains off during the freewrite and then back on afterwards.

My students quickly learn that I have high expectations for conventions when they submit their work to me; however, they always have time to edit their writing before they hand it in.

## Should I buy special journals or notebooks for freewriting?

No. The first year my students and I were freewriting, we wrote on loose-leaf paper. We created a section in our binder titled *Freewriting* and added our page to the section each time we wrote. Despite this system working well, the next year I bought special notebooks for my students' freewriting. It backfired. For several reasons, I think.

First, these *nice-looking journals* made the students reluctant to write what came to mind. The journals made them feel as if their writing should be finished,

# 2

## The Importance of Sharing

*“Alone we are smart. Together we are brilliant.”*

— Steven Anderson

I have a niece who does not often participate in class. So say her teachers. This surprises us, her family, knowing how much she loves to talk and communicate outside of school. I know she has much insight to contribute and her classmates would benefit from hearing her thoughts. She would also benefit from voicing her ideas to help her construct meaning. It is when we have to articulate our thoughts that we are forced to organize our ideas and make some sense of them. Campbell and McMartin (2017) suggest:

Literacy flourishes as oral language develops; oral language is the continuous vehicle and accompaniment for all literacy learning. Listening and speaking are essential for building a community of learners and for supporting literacy learners in all their diversity. (6)

Through the exchange of ideas (and not just the teacher’s), our students are going to experience the greatest learning. To advance and enrich their writing, it is essential that our students share their writing with their peers and learn to contribute ideas and feedback. As Stephen R. Covey (2004) said when defining *synergy*: “The whole is greater than the sum of its parts. One plus one equals three or more” (263). By synergizing with others, sharing insights, and being open to alternative viewpoints, students can magnify their learning and ultimately improve their writing.

### A Community of Learners

If writing makes us vulnerable, arguably then, sharing our writing makes us even more vulnerable. As teachers, we strive to create an environment in the classroom as safe and productive as possible. Students — *all* students — should feel comfortable letting their voices — spoken and written — be heard in our classroom community.

The sooner our students get used to sharing their writing, the better. We have all had students who share repeatedly and dominate the discussion if we let them. When establishing a community of learners, I make a concerted effort to create an environment that is fair to everyone. Yes, those students who want to read their writing aloud each time will have the opportunity to share — but not every

time. Students who are more reluctant or who need encouragement will also have an opportunity to share.

All voices in our classroom deserve to be heard. We cannot assume that loud is strong and quiet is weak, or, that loud is knowledgeable and quiet is ignorant. On many occasions, students who are reluctant to contribute in class have surprised me by their thoughts and insight. We cannot assume that our students don't understand something because they don't readily volunteer to participate. We also cannot presume that they don't *want* to share. Often, they do. They just need the right environment and perhaps a little more time and encouragement. As teachers, we must set the expectations and model the acceptance of ideas. We cannot expect all our students to walk into the classroom with the confidence to share their writing or their ideas. Nor can we expect all our students to behave with inherent respect to their peers. We must deliberately create a community of learners. We must establish a climate where students can take risks, where they can share their thoughts and feelings and know that they will be respected. We must convey to the class that all members are worthy and have the right to have their voices heard.

### Building Confidence

Reminding students that all of us have strengths and talents, and that some of us are naturally better at baseball, others at music, and still others at math, helps reinforce the acceptance of all despite our differences. And we shouldn't suppose that because our students are in Grade 5 or Grade 9 or Grade 12 they already know this. It is vital to establish this environment with each class, each year, as every dynamic is different. We might go about it differently depending on the grade we teach, but we cannot ignore the importance of having these conversations. They set the tone for our classroom environment.

One simple strategy I use to help set the tone and build the confidence of my students in the area of literacy is through my language. I call them "readers" and "writers" every day. "Okay, *readers*, choose your spot. We'll have 15 minutes of independent reading." "*Writers*, it's time to meet in our writing groups. Take a pencil and your favorite piece of work from last week to your meeting place." Simply by my referring to them in this way, students begin to see themselves in this way and ultimately gain confidence as readers and writers.

### All, Some, or None

As mentioned in Chapter 1, be sure to leave time for sharing after freewriting. It doesn't have to be long, but the time is valuable. "You may find the reading out loud frightening, but it is crucial. For there is a deep and essential relationship between writing and the speaking voice" (Elbow 1998, 22). We write, we read our work to ourselves, and then I ask for volunteers to share their writing. For the most part, I keep this initial sharing time as simply that: sharing. I invite students to read *all*, *some*, or *none* of their writing aloud. We move from person to person with not much more than a "thanks for sharing." We do not give feedback at this time.

After everyone who wants to share has had the opportunity, we might then discuss what we noticed in the writing; however, this feedback is not given to specific writers. A sample observation might be, "Wow! Did you notice how varied

our topics were today even though we all wrote using the same prompt?” Or, “I noticed that many of us wrote about our parents for this prompt.” And it is not only me, as teacher, making these connections; the students do, as well. Perhaps a student comments, “Our writing was powerful today.” I then ask, “What do you think made it so powerful?” Imagine the discussion to follow.

When students see and hear others sharing (and remember, they are sharing something they have just written with no time to revise or edit), they begin to realize that teachers do not expect their work to be perfect at the initial stage of writing. They also realize that their writing is not that different from the writing of those around them. Many of us — both students and adults — believe that “everyone else writes better.” Through the sharing of freewrites, students begin to understand that writing is a process for all of us.

### **Addressing Emotion Elicited by Freewrites**

Freewriting often takes us, as writers, to places we don’t expect to go. This is one of the reasons I appreciate the process. In the classroom environment, we have to be prepared to deal with the emotion that may surface in our students. An “I wish” prompt might become a list of desires for a particular writer on a given day; however, it also may lead us to writing about something far more profound than “I wish for a new puppy.” Through freewriting, painful topics sometimes surface — sometimes when we least expect them.

Inevitably, you will witness individual students brought to tears during or after a freewrite. The freedom of the process can unexpectedly lead our student writers to a topic that may be emotional. The simple prompt “I remember” can lead to a student writing about the death of her mother or lead another to describe ongoing abuse in the home. Sometimes, even though the topic is personal, a student decides to share this writing with the class. Ensuring that you have established a respectful, safe environment is the first step; being especially sensitive and modeling an appropriate reaction to the writing is the second step; talking with the student privately is the third step.

During a private discussion such as this, I typically give this student a journal (I always have a stash on hand from the dollar store). If the freewriting generated emotion, that student would likely benefit from continuing to express and process what is going on in his or her life through writing. The journal is not something I would expect the student to share with me. It is simply an outlet. I explain how much journal writing helped me cope with my father’s illness when I was in junior high and high school. I explain, too, how I was able to express my feelings when I didn’t want, or know how, to share these feelings with my family or friends. I affirm how writing continues to help me cope with the challenges of life and help me feel stronger as a person.

### **Writing Groups for Effective Feedback**

The act of writing is thought to be a solitary process, and it is. Writing improves, however, when we share it with others to gain feedback and perspective. I know this as a writer myself but when I first brought this idea into my classroom, some of my students were hesitant to share their work for this purpose. Others were

As long as we teach our students how to participate effectively, students of all ages will benefit from writing groups.

“Talk deepens thinking and learning. Yes, there are moments when we seek deep, reflective silence in our classrooms, but these moments are balanced by the frequent buzz that occurs when students share interesting thinking with each other” (Gallagher and Kittle 2018, 16).

excited, of course. These students tended to enjoy sharing (and the attention it brings) in any circumstance. But students who were quieter or more introverted, or who spoke less found the idea of writing groups somewhat intimidating. Yet, I discovered, writing groups were beneficial to all students.

What became glaringly obvious was that I couldn't just let students form a group, bring some writing, and call it a “writing group.” Students need to be taught the purpose of writing groups and, even more important, how to give and receive effective feedback. Once they see how writing groups benefit their work, their feedback tends to improve. Quality feedback leads to quality writing.

## The Purpose of Writing Groups

For myself as a writer, feedback from a reader is not only helpful but it also spurs more thoughts and changes to my work. My mom is the most frequent reader of my writing, and her comments or notes on my page are often enough to stimulate more thought and motivate me to continue the revision process. Teaching our students to give and receive feedback in writing groups can accomplish the same purpose.

As Elbow (1998) says, “Try believing your readers: not so you are stuck with their view forever but so you can see your writing through their eyes. You are not yet trying to make up your mind about anything, you are trying to enlarge your mind” (145). This approach is difficult for even the most experienced writers and certainly something that must be taught to our students.

### Giving and Dealing with Feedback

Professional writers know that rejection is a part of their lives: a given. For this reason, writers must become resilient simply to survive! As I was thinking about the latest rejection I received for a work of fiction, I noticed something different this time. Instead of a simple “no” or “not a good fit for our company,” I received a relatively long detailed rationale for the “no.” It began with some of my strengths. The editor then specifically outlined what she felt was not working with the manuscript. As disappointing as it was to get the “no,” this time I felt I understood the reasons and could then determine ways to improve my manuscript. But even so, I'll tell you this ... if she had jumped right into the critique without first addressing some positives, I would have found it hard to bear.

Even as an adult, even knowing this industry, I still appreciate the positive comments. They encourage me to persist and frame the critique. Thankfully, our students do not have to deal with the rejection of their work, but they do have to deal with feedback. We must be careful not to bombard our students with areas to improve without first commenting on what they are doing well. Just like me, they won't want to listen to the suggestions. Giving a balance of positive and constructive feedback is important.

Depending on the length of the assignment, students benefit from feedback a couple of times during the process of revision. Once they have chosen a free-write to revise, they meet with their writing groups to read and discuss the piece they want to develop, revise, edit, and publish. After taking away this initial feedback, they work on the piece for a couple of days. Eventually, they return to their

Writing group conversation should centre around the process of revision, not editing. Students should focus on the big ideas or the craft of writing, not the details of spelling or punctuation. There may be a time for peer editing, but it is not the purpose of the writing groups. (See Chapter 5 for more information about the distinction between revision and editing.)

writing groups to share the new and improved (but not yet final) version. This second time with their group leads to interesting discussion about the changes that have been made; it often results in more changes. Before I introduced writing groups to my students, I rarely saw my students revising their work multiple times, if at all.

### Focusing on Communication and Collaboration

Writing groups not only lead to improved writing, but also help us meet objectives in the curriculum related to communication, collaboration, peer interaction, and leadership. No matter which provincial or state curriculum we look to, and no matter the grade level or even the subject area, there is a focus on both communication and collaboration. In fact, as jurisdictions have undergone curricular redesign in recent years, the focus on these areas has grown, acknowledging the increasing importance of these skills in society today.

Consider British Columbia and Ontario. In 2015, British Columbia began transitioning to its redesigned curriculum: the curriculum outlines *communication* as one of the three core competencies. A focus on communication is embedded in each discipline of study and across the grade levels. Both the process of writing and work within writing groups would meet objectives under this competency, despite the discipline of study.

The *Ontario Curriculum, Grades 1–8: Language* (2006) has oral communication listed as the first of four strands. This strand has three overall expectations.

Students will:

1. listen in order to understand and respond appropriately in a variety of situations for a variety of purposes;
2. use speaking skills and strategies appropriately to communicate with different audiences for a variety of purposes;
3. reflect on and identify their strengths as listeners and speakers, areas for improvement, and the strategies they found most helpful in oral communication situations. (9–10)

Of course, it is not necessary to outline the objectives in each jurisdiction. The point is that writing groups accomplish goals in both written and oral communication regardless of the curriculum you follow: “[C]ollaboration needs to be a mainstay of the curriculum, a skill that is both used as a teaching tool and seen as a central piece of content” (Daniels, Bizar, and Zemelman 2001, 139). Writing groups accomplish this beautifully!

Writing groups are not limited to our language arts classrooms. They can be effectively incorporated into other disciplines as well. The focus could be a discussion of the content vocabulary or the style of writing specific to the discipline you teach. Or, the goal might be extending our students’ learning by sharing aloud their writing about what they have learned. Regardless, writing groups are effective in many disciplines of study.

### Establishing Writing Groups

I am very deliberate when establishing groups. My ideal group size is four. This size allows for everyone to have an opportunity to participate without the reading and sharing becoming overwhelming. If the group size becomes too large,

students may have difficulty staying engaged the whole time. If the group size is too small, students may not feel they are receiving enough meaningful feedback. I include students of a range of abilities and personalities within each group. I try to include at least one individual who, I think, will be a natural leader and help keep the group on track, someone who can say: “Okay, let’s move on. Tom, what did you notice about Bella’s writing today?”

It is important that all students have an opportunity to contribute. At the beginning, we must be sure to set the expectation and hold all students accountable for contributing. With practice, it becomes the norm. If you notice a student who is not engaging and is reluctant to participate, join that writing group a few times. Be a source of encouragement for your reluctant student, model patience waiting for that individual to speak, and praise any efforts if that student contributes to the discussion.

**Building Trust:** It is vital that students feel safe enough to share within their group. Another reason I choose the members of the writing group, rather than letting students choose, is for an optimum productivity and comfort level between students: avoiding potential conflict and building trust. For this reason, I also keep the writing groups the same throughout the year as much as possible. The first year I introduced writing groups to my students, I did not intend to keep the groups the same throughout the year. Partway through the year when I mentioned changing the groups, my students were adamant that the groups remain the same; they had established working relationships with the peers within their groups. Now I know: once trust is established, do not change the groups unless you have to. The students taught me this and it makes perfect sense.

**Considering Body Language:** It is essential to teach our students how to ensure that their body language is conducive to group work. Before we begin our first writing group session, I ask students to show me inappropriate, inattentive body language — to pretend they are not at all interested in what I have to say — and then, to show me appropriate, attentive behavior. The slouching, fidgeting, heads down, snoring even, ends quickly as their backs straighten and eye contact returns. The activity is enjoyable for students, and it also gets the point across. We talk about how I, as the speaker, feel with the inattentive body language versus the attentive body language. I remind them to show they are listening attentively by making eye contact and facing the reader.

To help facilitate this, I insist that all students within a writing group sit on the same level. If they choose the floor, that’s fine, but they *all* must be on the floor. If they sit on chairs, they are *all* on chairs. Doing this ensures that their body language is conducive to group work and that they can see and hear each other well. Sometimes when we let our students choose where to work, they sit all lined up against a wall or all on the same couch. While they might be comfortable this way, they cannot see each other. I remind them to sit in a close circle to create an optimal collaborative environment and minimize distractions.

### Giving Feedback

I believe all students can give effective feedback. But, they must be taught. I am sure to model — not just once, but a few times — what I consider useful and appropriate feedback. This modeling and demonstration sets the expectation for what we want to see within the writing groups. I remind students that all their

# 3

## Freewriting Prompts

*“No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader.  
No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.”*

— Robert Frost

Throughout the book, you will learn ways to integrate freewriting into the various subject areas you teach. This chapter provides a quick reference to prompts that are effective in any subject area, especially as you and your students become more familiar with freewriting. These prompts are typically universal, enabling each student to find success.

### General Prompts, Varied Responses

Everyone can respond to the prompt “I feel ...,” for example, because we all feel something. Everyone can respond to the prompt “I need ...,” again, because we all need something. We are not dictating what our students write: they are going to write what comes to mind based on the few words we give them. The writing will therefore be wonderfully varied. Writing assignments on a given topic such as a summer vacation limit our students’ choices and, therefore, the level of engagement. Not all students want to write about their summer vacations. Freewriting prompts, however, can lead us anywhere!

Provide a two- or three-word prompt regardless of the circumstance. Here is a basic list of effective prompts focused on *I*:

I remember ...	I want ...	I like to ...
I am ...	I need ...	Today I ...
I am not ...	I think ...	I believe ...
I am from ...	I feel ...	I enjoy ...
I’ve lost ...	I collect ...	
I wish ...	I wonder ...	

Some prompts, such as these, are slightly longer or written in a different format:

I am grateful for ...	The trouble with ...
I want to be ...	I wish my parents knew ...
I’m worried about ...	I wish my teacher knew ...
I’m not happy about ...	I wish I knew ...
I’m upset about ...	I feel good when ...
I am sorry that ...	A friend is ...

I am a friend to ...	Currently I see ...
Everybody should ...	Currently I feel ...
Sometimes I dream ...	The truth is ...
Maybe one day ...	I am obsessed with ...
I don't like people who ...	When we went to ...
What I like best about this class is ...	Writing is ...
The funniest thing I ever saw ...	I said goodbye to ...
I'm proud of myself when ...	I wish I had a key to ...
When I was six ...	My hands ...
The best laugh I've heard is ...	It's not fair that ...
You won't believe this, but ...	Learning to drive will be ...
The weather outside ...	When I am older ...

Let students write on a person of your choice or theirs: "My mom ...," "My dad ...," "My sister ...," "My brother ...," "My grandmother ...," "My uncle ...," "My neighbor ...," "My dentist ...," "My teacher ...," "My family is ..."

Invite students to write about favorites: "My favorite animal is ...," "My favorite color is ...," "My favorite shoes are ...," "My favorite movie is ..."

Choose a word, either concrete or abstract, to write about:

Love is ...	Christmas is ...	School is ...
Hope is ...	Summer is ...	Home is ...
Happiness is ...	Money is ...	
Sadness is ...	Pain is ...	

Put a provocative statement on the board, for example, "Every school should hire a police officer" or "Dogs are better than cats." Have students address the topic, responding with "I agree ..." or "I disagree ..."

Invite students to complete the following sentence and write about it further: "There are not enough \_\_\_\_\_ in the world. I think ..."

Provide a sensory writing experience. The students can write about popcorn while watching and listening to it pop, while smelling it, and perhaps even while tasting it. "Popcorn is ..."

Give an *If* prompt. For example: "If children ruled the world ...," "If I could fly ...," "If I were the principal ...," "If my dog could talk ...," "If I had a magic wand ...," "If we ran out of water ...," "If I had to move next week ...," "If I could buy anything ...," "If I could choose another name, I'd choose ...," "If I could go anywhere in the world ..."

Once your class becomes familiar with the idea of freewrites, offer a visual prompt. To prepare, collect interesting pictures or items. You could show your older students a dramatic news photo. For younger students, present something intriguing or perhaps a tad bizarre. Artwork, a wonderful option, too, is discussed more fully in Chapter 10.

Arrange for students to write to music. Try Vivaldi, Mozart, or Handel. Try Oscar Peterson, *The Phantom of the Opera*, or Enya. Afterwards, discuss the differences in the students' writing process and product when they write to music. This exercise is especially effective with simple two-word prompts such as "I feel ...," "I need ...," "I think ...," "I remember ...," or "I am ..." (Music is discussed more fully in Chapter 10.)

For an interesting twist, have the class write two freewrite opposites one after the other. For example, spend about seven minutes writing "I'm afraid of ..." and then surprise the students and have them spend as much time again responding

If I choose the topic of a sport, I give the students choice in the sport they write about. That way they can write about something they may be familiar with. I recognize that I would find it difficult to write more than a few sentences about cricket, something I know little about.

to “I’m not afraid of ...” Other pairs of prompts that work well include “I want ...” and “I need ...”; “I love ...” and “I hate ...”; “I know ...” and “I don’t know ...”; “I’ve found ...” and “I’ve lost ...”; “My favorite food ...” and “My least favorite food ...”

Let students write about a sport, perhaps baseball, basketball, hockey, dance, fencing, football, rugby, swimming, diving, tennis, soccer, wrestling, volleyball, or water polo. “Baseball is ...”

Choose (or let students choose) a color to write about: “Red is ...”; “Black is ...”; “Blue makes me feel ...”

Use the change of seasons as a prompt: “Fall is ...”; “Winter is ...”; “My favorite thing about spring is ...”; “This summer I plan to ...”

Invite students to write about even the simplest of things: a blade of grass, the leaves turning from green to yellow, a vase of flowers, a glass of milk, their desks, a comfortable chair. Although seemingly mundane, these topics can yield fascinating, creative work. Again, be sure that there is a prompt and understand that less writing may be generated from a prompt like this: “A blade of grass ...” or “A glass of milk ...”

You might challenge students to change their point of view. They could write as if an animal: the family pet, a circus lion, a wild horse. “Today I ...” or “If only ...”

## Prompts in Response to Quotations

As you have probably gathered, I am a lover of words. In my classroom, there is a different quotation on the board every day. I notice many students reading it as soon as they enter the room. Often, I don’t do anything with the quotations: they simply provide inspiration or provoke thought, the words resonating with my students throughout the day. I encourage you to feature quotations, too.

The language of some of the quotations may at first seem out of reach for your students; however, you may be surprised at how soon they learn to grapple with the style of the language of various eras. They will learn about and from notable leaders, educators, authors, actors, scientists, theorists, and philanthropists of the past and present.

In addition to learning about various topics and people, quotations are often chosen because they are well written. Fletcher (1996) says, “I’ve learned that if I am going to write well, I need to surround my words with the beautiful writing of others” (108). The repeated exposure to quotations could potentially enhance the depth of students’ thinking and the quality of their writing. Students unconsciously, and sometimes consciously, learn new vocabulary or emulate a certain rhythm or cadence of a writer.

On occasion, my students and I freewrite about the quotation. As mentioned in *How Do I Get Them to Write?* I also invite students to respond in their visual journals from time to time. Consider making this a weekly routine. Perhaps each Tuesday when they enter the room, they could respond to the day’s quotation. Or perhaps, you could build this into Friday’s routine for the last 15 minutes of class. Do whatever works in your schedule. As they write, reflect, and discuss, students will learn from each other and internalize some of the wisdom of the ages. This practice is effective no matter the age of your students.

Eventually, your students may ask if they can put their favorite quotations on the whiteboard as well. Or, if you choose a star student every week, you could make selecting a quotation one of the student’s duties. Often, students get their

Keep a running list of your quotations so you are not searching each day. I have created a Pinterest board for this purpose.

You'll notice that, when possible, I have indicated the author of the quotation with a simple description and the years of birth and death, if applicable. Depending on the age of your students, this detail can add to their learning and discussion as they appreciate the quotation's context.

parents involved in this search which may lead to wonderful discussion and learning as a family.

Some quotations to get you started:

- "I never lose. I either win or learn."  
— Nelson Mandela, *first South African president (1918–2013)*
- "Whatever you are, be a good one."  
— Abraham Lincoln, *16th president of the United States (1809–65)*
- "I do believe something magical can happen when you read a good book."  
— J. K. Rowling, *British novelist (1965– )*
- "Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much."  
— Helen Keller, *American author and political activist (1880–1968)*
- "Storms make trees take deeper roots."  
— Dolly Parton, *American country music singer and songwriter (1946– )*
- "Some people feel the rain. Other people just get wet."  
— Bob Marley, *Jamaican singer and songwriter (1945–81)*
- "In this life we cannot do great things. We can only do small things with great love."  
— Mother Teresa, *Saint Teresa of Calcutta (1910–97)*
- "I am careful not to confuse excellence with perfection. Excellence, I can reach for; perfection is God's business."  
— Michael J. Fox, *Canadian-American actor, author, and activist (1961– )*
- "We need never be ashamed of our tears." (*Great Expectations*)  
— Charles Dickens, *English novelist (1812–70)*
- "There are only two ways to live your life. One is as though nothing is a miracle. The other is as though everything is a miracle."  
— Albert Einstein, *German-born physicist (1879–1955)*
- "We lose ourselves in books; we find ourselves there too."  
— Author unknown
- "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful citizens can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."  
— Margaret Mead, *American cultural anthropologist (1901–78)*
- "To the world, you may be just one person; but to one person, you may be the world."  
— Josephine Billings, *American volunteer and advocate (1907–2002)*
- "Give a man a fish, you feed him for the day; teach him how to fish, you feed him for a lifetime."  
— Lao Tzu, *Chinese philosopher (born 604 BCE)*
- "The most wasted of all days is one without laughter."  
— e. e. Cummings, *American poet (1894–1962)*
- "Anything is possible if you try."  
— Terry Fox, *Canadian athlete, humanitarian (1958–81)*
- "Listen, or your tongue will keep you deaf."  
— Native American proverb
- "You miss 100% of the shots you don't take."  
— Wayne Gretzky, *Canadian professional hockey player and coach (1961– )*
- "Kindness is a language that the deaf can hear and the blind can see."  
— Mark Twain, *American writer (1835–1910)*
- "The pen is mightier than the sword."  
— Edward Bulwer Lytton, *English author (1803–73)*

When freewriting about a quotation, teach students to record the quotation and source at the top of their page. They can then use one of these prompts when responding: “I think ...,” “I feel ...,” “In my opinion ...,” or even, “These words ...”

## Prompts for Reflection and Goal-Setting

Freewriting is an effective tool for reflection and goal-setting. If we train our students to use it regularly, it can be a process that leads to introspection. Curricular objectives often include metacognition: students *thinking about their thinking*. Freewriting facilitates this beautifully.

- At the beginning of a unit, students can freewrite about what they know or hope to accomplish or learn. At the beginning of a unit on magnets, for example, simply use the prompt “Magnets ...” You could also add these prompts on the board for the students to continue their writing: “I wonder ...” or “I think ...”
- At the end of a unit or term, students can freewrite as a means of reflection, goal-setting, and self-assessment: “In this unit, I learned ...” or “I was surprised by ...”
- At the end of each month, have students freewrite about the month: “September was ...,” “In October I learned ...,” or “The best parts of November were ...”

An effective end-of-term activity is to invite students to spend a half-hour or so rereading the last few months of their freewrites. Typically, there is a hush in the room punctuated by the turning of pages. Sometimes there is the odd laugh or two, and sometimes, even a few tears. Students are almost always surprised at how much they have written. They often begin to feel more confident about their writing abilities.

There are several things you could do with these rereading sessions.

- As students are reading, ask them to highlight favorite sentences. (Young students tend to over-highlight. You may need to say, “In all of your writing, I want you to pick your five or six favorite sentences.” Students can then create a poem using phrases from their work: a *found poem* about the term.
- Students can choose their favorite piece from the term and revise and edit this piece for publication. Perhaps this piece could be shared at a parent-teacher-student conference or demonstration of learning. Or, it could be put on the bulletin board.
- One way to push students to make connections and be more introspective is by tying together several pieces of their work. As they are rereading their freewriting, encourage them to look for a common thread or theme in four or five pieces. Once they have chosen their theme (and the relevant pieces of writing that contributed to this theme), the students can meet with their writing groups to discuss a culminating project. I give students some freedom to decide how they can make this work, but the assignment is to write some introductory sentences, polish their chosen pieces, and unify them in some way. Through an assignment such as this, students will learn more about themselves and the world around them. This project can be assessed since students are given time to revise and edit their work.

## Freewriting for English Language Learners

Freewriting generally works well with all students, including those learning the English language.

We must be cognizant of our expectations, however. We cannot expect a Spanish-speaking student, new to the English language, to write nearly the same amount as our English-speaking students. We cannot expect these students new to English to write as fluently, either. Increased quantity and improved quality will come in time.

To support our English language learners, consider these alternatives:

- Give students the option of freewriting in their first language. This will help them become comfortable with the process and perhaps feel more immediately successful. Even though you cannot read their writing, likely, they will be very proud to read it to you in their first language and then translate the main idea.
- Include the word *because* in your prompt: “I am happy because ...”; “I am worried because ...”; “Today is an amazing day because ...” The addition of this simple word may help your English language learners structure both their thoughts and their writing.
- Provide extra time for their freewriting. I would be quite overwhelmed to write in another language and I imagine it would be slow-going at first! Perhaps your English language learners will want to continue writing when the rest of the class begins to read over their work and share. Offer this option beforehand. Be open and explain this provision to your other students, too, so they understand why these students may choose to write a little longer.

## Gathering Details and Ideas to Enrich Writing

I blog each week. I used to wonder if I would ever run out of things to say. Thankfully, it hasn’t happened yet! Natalie Goldberg (2005) says,

Writers live twice. They go along with their regular life, are as fast as anyone in the grocery store, crossing the street, getting dressed for work in the morning. But there’s another part of them that they have been training. The one that lives everything a second time. That sits down and sees their life again and goes over it. Looks at the texture and details. (53)

I don’t consciously go looking for things to write about; as I go about my week, an idea for my next blog usually surfaces. If it hasn’t, as I look back on the week, I think about commonalities or tidbits I have overheard. Something always strikes me.

As your students begin to freewrite more, they will begin to experience the same thing. Details will seep into their writing. They will remember the dog they saw in the park or what their mom said as they were leaving for school and store the memory for their next opportunity to write. This process will become natural for many of our students, but we can also make this process more intentional.

There are two especially effective ways that we can teach our students to gather ideas: a writer’s notebook and heart maps. It’s not that we have to consult this

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***Freewriting with Purpose*** provides teachers with simple classroom techniques to help students make connections, think critically, and construct meaning. It argues that freewriting is a powerful method you can use to help students develop strong social emotional skills and become confident, compassionate citizens.

This timely book explores innovative ways to use writing as a form of thinking in all areas of the curriculum. It is committed to encouraging students to

- become more aware of their learning process
- make connections between a discipline of study and their own life experiences
- develop critical thinking skills
- construct meaning, deepening their understanding of the content
- engage more fully in the curriculum
- ultimately, become more confident, effective writers

Based on extensive classroom experience, this comprehensive resource covers the essentials of the freewriting process and explores how this technique can become the backbone of your classroom writing program. Through this technique, students are more eager to write. They understand that freewriting is about getting thoughts on paper, then revising and editing to improve the communication of those first thoughts.

***Freewriting with Purpose*** empowers teachers to use the writing that accumulates through freewriting to target and teach specific skills. It demonstrates how the intentional use of mentor texts can provide both the method and models to dramatically improve the quality of student writing. Numerous mentor text titles are identified for each discipline of study.

This engaging book illustrates that, through freewriting in all areas of the curriculum, students will *write to learn* as they *learn to write* more effectively.



Greg Campbell

**Karen Filewych** has more than twenty years of educational experience as an elementary teacher, school administrator, and language arts consultant. In 2007, she completed her master of education degree in the area of literacy. Her busy life includes writing, teaching, and presenting workshops to teachers. Her website, Words Change Worlds, highlights the power of words and provides teachers with regular book reviews and teaching ideas. Karen is the author of *How Do I Get Them to Write?* She lives in Edmonton, Alberta, with her family.

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