

Freewriting: Don't Think Twice, It's All Write

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Freewriting (FW) (also known as timed writing or quick writing) is a 10 or 15-minute writing activity used to originate ideas and eliminate writer's block. It helps students develop and express content by separating idea generation from the editing stage. The activity aids writers in generating content, which can be used for later writings, and also teaches how to write under time pressure. In this paper, I will advocate the use of FW for EFL writing classes. One technique of guided FW will be defined and outlined. Then, the procedure for implementing this activity will be explained, including possible pitfalls. Finally, a list of potential topics will be provided, along with possible applications of how these ideas can be used and developed in writing assignments.

フリーライティング(FW) は、タイムドライティング、あるいはクイックライティングとしても知られ、10分もしくは15分で書き上げる行為である。アイデアの創造とライターズブロック(創作上の行き詰まり)の払拭がその目的であり、構想段階を推敲段階から切り離すことで、学生が自らのアイデアを発展させ表現するのに役立つ。FWは文章の内容を生み出す助けになり、書いた内容は後に別のライティングでも使えるメリットもあり、限られた時間内でどのように書くかを学ぶこともできる。本論文では、EFLライティングの授業においてFWの採用を提唱する。一つの手法を定義付けその概要を述べた後、起こりうる難題も含め、実施の手順を述べる。最後に、使用可能が見込まれるトピックスのリストを掲載し、その応用として、これらのアイデアがライティングの課題でどのように用いられ、発展させられるかも論じる。

Freewriting, also known as timed writing or quick writing, is a type of stream-of-consciousness expressive writing practice. There are many varieties of the activity, with ranges of time, content, and review. Some instructors make the writing content totally free, while others assign a topic or theme. In this paper I describe focused FW, in which one main theme is assigned. The activity emphasizes spontaneous production of language and stimulates invention while deemphasizing attention to grammar and correctness (Jacobs, 1986). Elbow and Belanoff (2000) define FW as writing any ideas or thoughts that come to mind in a given time period without stopping. EFL students often fall into the habit of merely producing what is required with as few mistakes as possible. Students avoid taking chances, resulting in less complex writing of fewer words (Perl, 1979; Bonzo, 2008). By focusing on con-

tent over form, students can write more freely and experiment with language without fear of penalty or correction. FW is a useful activity for L1 writers, but is particularly appropriate for L2 writers in that it allows students to focus on the single task of generating ideas. In this paper, I will explain the benefits of focused FW, describe the procedure and the rules, and provide examples of how FW can be used in later, more formal writing.

Benefits

FW forces students to think in English and provides raw material for formal writing assignments. Students can concentrate on putting ideas on paper without concern about errors (Jacobs, 1986), freeing themselves from the typical overattention on the avoidance of mistakes, and can be, as Ueland (1938) suggests, "free and bold ... careless and reckless. Be a lion, be a pirate. Write any old way" (p. 55).

Because the activity is not corrected or graded, students can ignore the urge to go back and edit or get hung up on grammar. Students no longer feel the need to write to please the teacher and can forget about writing and spontaneously and impulsively tell their ideas (Ueland, 1938, p. 80). Also, FW separates the writing process into recursive steps, allowing students to take the writing process one step at a time and separate writing from editing (Jacobs, 1986; Elbow, 2000).

FW can lead to writing fluency which Casanave (2004) defines as "a writer's ability to produce a lot of language without excessive hesitations, blocks, or interruptions" (p. 67). Hwang (2010) found that EFL students who practiced FW for eight weeks had statistically significant improvements in their writing fluency. A final benefit is preparation for essay writing sections of the TOEFL, IELTS, or the STEP (Eiken) test. All of these tests require students to generate ideas and write quickly with a focus on content over error-free prose.

Meeting Criticisms

Critics of FW consider it a "shallow and permissive activity with no discipline" (Hwang, 2010, p. 99).

FW is not a panacea; it serves as a useful warmup activity and as an idea generator. Still, it is true that grammar mistakes remain uncorrected, and students could possibly choose the easiest vocabulary for expression. Students need to understand that FW is writing practice with the focus on speed and content. Homework will be corrected for grammar mistakes and appropriate vocabulary can be taught. In addition, the instructor can have occasional grammar clinics or spelling quizzes based on FW mistakes. Furthermore, the instructor can make individual comments, such as suggestions to try to write more words and longer or clearer sentences. There is the possibility of repeating the same FW topic in a later class to see what types of improvements have been or could be made.

Once ideas have been generated, students can shift their frame of mind from the inventive to the critical and skeptical mindset necessary for the revision stage. Elbow (2000) notes that, "We can learn to revise, strengthen, and correct our writing more effectively if, after we have freely generated lots of rich material, we take on a critical and skeptical mentality, pondering, thinking about readers, rearranging, and crossing out in a tough-minded, suspicious mood" (p. xiv).

Prewriting Stage

The teacher should select a focused FW (see Appendix, and remember that students can also generate their own theme), allowing a chosen topic to structure students' thoughts for the 10-minute activity. After experimenting with time, I have found 10 minutes to be the ideal length. A shorter time period is not enough time to explore the topic and find a flow, while 15 to 20 minutes can physically and mentally exhaust students. Another suggestion is to be consistent with time. I use a timer set at exactly 10 minutes without variation, no matter what the degree of difficulty of the topics. Students respond positively to this pattern of regularity because they know what to expect.

The teacher then introduces the FW topic and explains it, usually by orally asking a number of questions, without writing on the board. Difficult topics can be discussed in pairs or groups before the writing to review ideas and vocabulary. Students could be told the topic a week in advance, and then research it before coming to class. Dickson (2001) relates a number of prompts he devises from class activities and discussions, including short stories, music, art, video, poetry, or proverbs. The three goals of the focused FW should be impressed upon students: to communicate ideas, to think in English, and to write as many words as possible.

Rules

1. Write continuously and as much as possible, focusing on content and ideas. Do not stop writing. Elbow (2000) explains: "Don't plan, don't stop, trust that something will come in ... and get oneself rolling into a more intense state of preparation and long-range production" (p. 85). Kerouac (1958) suggests writers "write without consciousness in a semi-trance and never after think to improve."
2. Pay no attention to grammar, spelling, neatness, or style. Correctness and quality do not matter; the act of writing does. Concentrate on ideas. Casanave (1994) believes students tend to try out more of their ideas in such a risk free environment.
3. No erasers or dictionaries are allowed. If students don't know a word in English, they can substitute the L1 word and look up the word later. Mistakes should merely be crossed out. It is useful for the teacher to show an example of what a finished FW looks like. The teacher should monitor the class to make sure no one is being distracted by old habits. I physically move erasers out of reach as I walk around the room during the activity.
4. Do not grade or correct FW since the emphasis is on content and ideas. I announce that I only record the word count in my grade book, and that no letter grade will be given. Hyland (1998) notes that pressure from worries about grading or feedback can hinder students' writing output, both in complexity and quantity. FW can alleviate this pressure.
5. When the time is up, students count the number of words and write it on the paper, then write the English for any L1 words they used. Another option is for students to use this time to bracket the best parts of their writing (see Jacobs, 1986).

To be effective and for improvement to take place, FW needs to be done regularly. I use the activity at the beginning of class every week. FW serves as an attendance check, motivates students to arrive on time, and immediately gets the class on task. Some writing teachers also assign a FW for homework every week. Students can easily invest the weekly 10 minutes required for this activity, especially if they can see improvement and believe in the activity. As Elbow (2000) says, "The whole point of FW is to accept anything, to trust it, to trust your mind" (p. 92).

Responding to Freewriting

Students generally expect teachers to correct all their writing and it takes some training for them to accept that instructors are not shirking their duty

by not correcting errors. Elbow notes that learning occurs even if the teacher doesn't write comments: "When we assign a piece of writing and don't comment on it, we are not *not* teaching: we are actively setting up powerful conditions for learning by getting students to do the things they wouldn't do without the force of our teaching" (2000, p. 357).

I assure students that I read all their papers. I use check marks to note key points (usually 2-5 per paper) and underline effective or strong passages by putting a straight line under them. Elbow (2000) also recommends this minimum non-verbal response. Jacobs (1986) suggests that students and the teacher review the FW and place brackets around the *good* parts that could be used in a later draft. I also underline the word count and sometimes compare it with other FW. If given a chance to write often, students will improve word counts significantly, although the numbers will vary depending on the topic and the students' attitudes towards it. Occasionally I write questions or comments, but never a token inauthentic phrase such as "good job," which can potentially inhibit learning opportunities (Wong & Waring, 2009). Checking or reading a FW can be done in one to two minutes. Although FW should not be corrected, the teacher can note frequent errors and provide a grammar clinic or spelling quiz in a later class to review some common errors. This is especially pertinent for those topics which may be written about again in a more formal assignment. There are no hard and fast rules for checking FW other than the teacher's promise to read every paper.

A few students would like error correction. I encourage them to underline passages, or put a question mark where they would like corrections if needed. The instructor can also answer questions as they collect or return papers.

Application for Later Activities

Elbow (2000) believes FW is easy to shape and edit into a more coherent essay. "A free written draft is crude and rough and easy to cut, add to, and rearrange" (p. 87). While revision requires a different mindset, Goldberg (1986) believes revision is "envisioning again" and suggests that writers use the methods and rules of timed writing in the revision stage. To add details and rethink helps the writer become re-engaged (p. 209). Hammond (1991) asserts that focused FW promotes critical thinking. After FW, students were able to have deeper insight on the FW topic because it allowed them think inductively instead of jumping to hasty conclusions.

The FW activity can also be used as a continuation of class activities (see Dickson, 2001), or as

preparation for a later essay. Students can read each other's works and bracket the best points. Even in poor writing, certain parts are always better than others, and students benefit from having this pointed out (Elbow, 2000).

FW topics that could provide substance for more formal essays include an English language learning history, childhood memories, the most important person that ever lived, a famous person I'd like to meet, or my schedule. A self-introduction essay can be given to a partner who must interview their partner and write an essay about him or her. Music as a FW topic can serve as a warm-up for an essay in which students examine two songs in compare-and-contrast format. The instructor could give a spelling quiz (not graded) to review the most common misspellings (bass, acoustic, guitar, chorus, ballad, etc.). Food as a FW theme could also inspire a spelling quiz, and ideas generated could provide the foundation for a process description about how to prepare a type of food.

Caveats

One warning about FW must be made. Some students enjoy the rules and freedoms of FW and may attempt to use the same technique to write their homework. One-take homework assignments without editing or revisions are not acceptable. Receiving such an assignment provides teachers with an opportunity to explain and reinforce the differences between the precision, revision, and organization required of homework and the idea-generation focus of FW.

Conclusion

Japanese English-language students are often apprehensive about writing, and are mistake averse. FW adds a different mindset to the writing process. The benefits of FW are many: it serves as an icebreaker, and gets students on task and thinking in English. It is appealing and challenging to students of all levels. In addition, it provides a new and creative way of thinking about writing, and offers some special freedoms. Students can appreciate the idea of not being checked for errors and focusing on content over form.

Students can write without embarrassment since, as Kerouac says, there is "no fear or shame in the dignity of your experience, language, or life" (cited in Goldberg, 1986, p. xv). When students see other people doing FW in the same place, it produces a positive peer effect as well (Elbow, 2000).

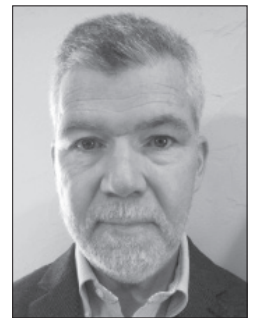
Use of FW by itself in a classroom will not automatically produce better writers. It is one tool to develop writing skills. That being said, I believe FW

should be an integral part of any writing class, and can be used effectively in conversation and reading classes as well. FW can be “an occasion of discovery and of getting to know and appreciate our mind” (Elbow, 2000, p. 88), which is beneficial in any academic or intellectual activity.

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Appendix: Freewriting Topics

- What animal would you like to be?
- Introduction from parents' point of view
- My hometown
- If I could go back in time
- What events changed your life?
- Advice for new students
- Last year's English class
- My dream
- My favorite book
- Entertainment
- Self-introduction
- What's changed since last year?
- My favorite class
- Movies
- My most important possession
- A country I'd like to visit
- Internet
- The nicest thing I've ever done
- First love
- If I could meet a famous person...
- Sports
- Strange fashions
- If I was leader of my country...
- Pets
- My schedule
- The perfect meal
- More people should care about...
- Homework
- Living alone is/would be
- On my next birthday...
- I wish I were better at...
- If I could change one thing...
- World problems
- A happy family memory
- An unusual person I know
- When I am older...
- Teachers should...
- My favorite sport
- Favorite part of the day
- Something I hope never happens
- Dreams
- The top 10 things about me
- In the year 2025...
- When I am bored...
- Nature and the environment
- My best vacation ever
- Television
- I laugh when...
- A person I would like to meet (and why)
- A turning point in my life
- Food
- Bucket list (before I die I want to...)
- I need to learn how to...
- A person I admire and respect
- Friends
- The hardest thing for me is...
- The most useful inventions...
- The best time of day is...
- The best compliment I ever received
- One talent I wish I had
- Music
- Weekends
- An embarrassing moment
- Childhood memories
- My English language learning history
- Crime
- Hobbies
- A place you visited
- Things you would like to try
- Things that make you angry 10 years from now
- Happiness
- A time when you did a favor
- If I had a million dollars
- Earliest memories
- A time when you were frightened
- Friends
- A super power you'd like to have
- A regret
- If I could time travel...
- Superstitions
- My most difficult class
- My family
- Three goals I have

Don't forget to ask students for their suggestions!