

Freewriting

Freewriting is a term invented by Peter Elbow.¹ It simply means writing continuously for a fixed period of time. The challenge of freewriting for children and adults is to write when they might not feel like writing; it's about 'getting on with it'. Normally freewriting takes the form of continuous prose but it does not have to be grammatically correct, syntactically complete or carefully considered. Form is not stipulated. The writing often looks like a set of notes with sentences, key words and phrases happily mixing together.

The purpose of freewriting is to get ideas out and to overcome the anxiety that can arise when people are worried that their writing will not be correct or clear enough. In freewriting sessions, they are encouraged not to worry but to keep going. They are encouraged to have faith that, with pen in hand, they will discover their own thoughts.

How to use freewriting in a dialogical context

Imagine you have just shared a text with pupils. You might ask them to use freewriting to make connections between their own lives—their interests, values and experiences—and the text. You might say: 'write non stop for 10 minutes to see if you can discover something that connects what you think is important with the story we've just read together.'

Since you are guiding the writing towards a particular outcome, you could call it focused freewriting.² You can vary the focus as you think appropriate. A more open response might follow guidance from you such as: 'write non stop for 10 minutes to discover your first thoughts on the story we've just read together'. I've emphasised the work 'discover' because, in an important sense, freewriting is an act of discovery. Experiment with the words you use in your instructions to see which your pupils respond to best.

After a session of freewriting, you could ask pupils to underline anything they felt was significant, important, surprising or interesting. It's good to use this vocabulary in your conversations with pupils because you will be helping them to name and understand evaluative concepts that will assist their writing and thinking. Ask them to share points they have underlined with their peers, either in a whole-class or small-group setting. They shouldn't necessarily read the actual words they wrote, although they can if they wish. The point is to have used freewriting to discover some ideas. Pupils may want to re-express those ideas, or elaborate on them, when they change to the oral channel of communication.

The advantage of using freewriting in a dialogical context such as this is that pupils' ideas are not ignored. They contribute to ever widening cycles of response. The freewriting itself is disposable or, if pupils use *i*-writing books, it can remain as part of an archive of each pupil's ideas and interests. Eventually, pupils may, unprompted, use freewriting as a tool for thinking. In this case the freewriting is often thrown away. But first they should learn, through dialogue, the usefulness of freewriting as a process of discovering their thoughts and then sifting what is more or less significant. Here is a list of dialogical situations in which freewriting could be used. It is by no means an exhaustive one:

1. To make connections between interests, experiences and texts as explained above.
2. At the start of a class dialogue about a question, use free writing to elicit some 'first thoughts' from participants. As above, you should ask pupils to pick out significant thoughts from their writing to share. The creation of first thoughts through writing rather than speaking could be helpful to pupils who rarely speak. They will have time to gather and record their ideas before orally uninhibited pupils start to dominate the session.

3. A variation of point 2 is to give pupils a question to freewrite about at the end of a lesson. The question will be discussed orally in another session. Freewriting helps pupils to prepare their thoughts. Some teachers like to share a stimulus and establish a question with pupils in one session and discuss it the next. Freewriting can assist this strategy.
3. Use freewriting as way of reflecting on the significance of a dialogue. Ask the pupils to do a short piece of freewriting to summarise their thoughts about an oral dialogue they have just completed. What did they find interesting, important, provocative or agreeable?
4. If pupils are discussing a question and you find that a few people are talking a lot and others not at all, or if feel the dialogue is losing its momentum with some pupils looking lost, use freewriting to change the dynamic and provide fresh ideas. You could say, for example: 'Let's pause and do some freewriting on what you think are the most important things to discuss next' or 'Lets do some freewriting about what how we would answer the question is right now' or even 'Let's do some freewriting about what we think the problems are with this dialogue'.
5. Some discussions get heated and you are uncertain about how you should intervene. Use a short burst of freewriting to cool things down, allowing pupils (and yourself) to gather your thoughts. Then return to the discussion, asking pupils what, for them, is the most important thing to say next. The writing gives everyone a chance to respond and provides an archive of varied thoughts about a discussion hotspot. That isn't always possible in the heat of the moment when some particular voices dominate. Freewriting provides you with the opportunity to ask for alternative points of view.

Are some children too young to freewrite?

At some point between the ages of four and six, children are able to write, tell you what the writing means and believe that the meaning stays the same over time. Before this, they may make their marks and tell you the marks mean something different at every time of asking.³

That is not to say that you will necessarily be able to read what they write without their explanation even after they realise the meaning of writing stays the same. That is because it takes time for them to develop the full range of letters and letter shapes. Nevertheless, it may be that freewriting is possible and potentially useful even at this early stage in the development of writing simply because it requires children to reflect in a concentrated way by channelling their thinking into the making of significant signs. The following experiments with freewriting would be interesting for a teacher of young children.

1. Keep the freewriting very brief. You might just ask them to write down an idea or thought in response to something you share with them or a question you ask.
2. Ask children what their writing means. Then, yourself, write a summary under the child's writing so you can remember what it says.
3. Place the writing on the floor, refer to it, repeat it and ask other children to consider the idea(s) it expresses.
4. Consider whether this process has any effects, good or bad, on the quality of children's discussion and on their developing ideas about what writing can be for. See whether they tend to write more or less in future during a normal school day.

Summary

Freewriting helps children to discover their thoughts and sift what is more or less significant. It can assist oral dialogue. It also helps children to write without anxiety and to consider writing as a natural and productive activity.

Transition activities

Show pupils some brief and simple freewriting of your own that you have done in a 'real life' situation. Show them what you discovered by it and what you pulled out from it as being significant—a useful or interesting idea or a bit of your own expression you liked and wanted to remember. Invite them to share some of their own freewriting from time to time in the same way. For example, they could share some of the free writing in the i-writing books in as part of short session about writing (not interrupting the oral dialogue). Encourage children to use freewriting to develop their own thoughts and ask them when they might use it without you asking them to do so.

ENDNOTES

- ^{1.} Peter Elbow uses the the term and recommends the practice book such as: *Writing Without Teachers*, 1973, New York: Oxford University Press and *Writing With Power: Techniques for Maturing the Writing Process (2nd Edition)*, 1998, New York: Oxford University Press.
- ^{2.} This term is used by John C. Bean in *Engaging Ideas: The Professor's Guide to Integrating Writing, Critical Thinking, and Active Learning in the Classroom*, 2001, Jossey-Bass
- ^{3.} See research cited in: Liliana Tolchinsky, *The Cradle of Culture and What children Know About Writing and Numbers Before Being Taught*, 2003 Lawrence Erlbaum Associates