

Freewriting Exercises

THE most effective way I know to improve your writing is to do freewriting exercises regularly. At least three times a week. They are sometimes called “automatic writing,” “babbling,” or “jabbering” exercises. The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don’t stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can’t think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, “I can’t think of it.” Just put down something. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it’s fine to write “I can’t think what to say, I can’t think what to say” as many times as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you *never* stop.

What happens to a freewriting exercise is important. It must be a piece of writing which, even if someone reads it, doesn’t send any ripples back to you. It is like writing something and putting it in a bottle in the sea. The teacherless class helps your writing by providing maximum feedback.

Freewritings help you by providing no feedback at all. When I assign one, I invite the writer to let me read it. But also tell him to keep it if he prefers. I read it quickly and make no comments at all and I do not speak with him about it. The main thing is that a freewriting must never be evaluated in any way; in fact there must be no discussion or comment at all.

Here is an example of a fairly coherent exercise (sometimes they are very incoherent, which is fine):

I think I'll write what's on my mind, but the only thing on my mind right now is what to write for ten minutes. I've never done this before and I'm not prepared in any way—the sky is cloudy today, how's that? now I'm afraid I won't be able to think of what to write when I get to the end of the sentence—well, here I am at the end of the sentence—here I am again, again, again, again, at least I'm still writing—Now I ask is there some reason to be happy that I'm still writing—ah yes! Here comes the question again—What am I getting out of this? What point is there in it? It's almost obscene to always ask it but I seem to question everything that way and I was gonna say something else pertaining to that but I got so busy writing down the first part that I forgot what I was leading into. This is kind of fun oh don't stop writing—cars and trucks speeding by somewhere out the window, pens clattering across peoples' papers. The sky is still cloudy—is it symbolic that I should be mentioning it? Huh? I dunno. Maybe I should try colors, blue, red, dirty words—wait a minute—no can't do that, orange, yellow, arm tired, green pink violet magenta lavender red brown black green—now that I can't think of any more colors—just about done—relief? maybe.

HOW FREEWRITING EXERCISES HELP

Freewriting may seem crazy but actually it makes simple sense. Think of the difference between speaking and writing. Writing has the advantage of permitting more editing. But

that's its downfall too. Almost everybody interposes a massive and complicated series of editings between the time words start to be born into consciousness and when they finally come off the end of the pencil or typewriter onto the page. This is partly because schooling makes us obsessed with the “mistakes” we make in writing. Many people are constantly thinking about spelling and grammar as they try to write. I am always thinking about the awkwardness, wordiness, and general mushiness of my natural verbal product as I try to write down words.

But it's not just “mistakes” or “bad writing” we edit as we write. We also edit unacceptable thoughts and feelings, as we do in speaking. In writing there is more time to do it so the editing is heavier: when speaking, there's someone right there waiting for a reply and he'll get bored or think we're crazy if we don't come out with *something*. Most of the time in speaking, we settle for the catch-as-catch-can way in which the words tumble out. In writing, however, there's a chance to try to get them right. But the opportunity to get them right is a terrible burden: you can work for two hours trying to get a paragraph “right” and discover it's not right at all. And then give up.

Editing, *in itself*, is not the problem. Editing is usually necessary if we want to end up with something satisfactory. The problem is that editing goes on *at the same time* as producing. The editor is, as it were, constantly looking over the shoulder of the producer and constantly fiddling with what he's doing while he's in the middle of trying to do it. No wonder the producer gets nervous, jumpy, inhibited, and finally can't be coherent. It's an unnecessary burden to try to think of words and also worry at the same time whether they're the right words.

The main thing about freewriting is that it is *nonediting*. It is an exercise in bringing together the process of producing words and putting them down on the page. Practiced regularly, it undoes the ingrained habit of editing at the same time you are trying to produce. It will make writing less blocked because words will come more easily. You will use up more paper, but chew up fewer pencils.

Next time you write, notice how often you stop yourself from writing down something you were going to write down. Or else cross it out after it's written. "Naturally," you say, "it wasn't any good." But think for a moment about the occasions when you spoke well. Seldom was it because you first got the beginning just right. Usually it was a matter of a halting or even garbled beginning, but you kept going and your speech finally became coherent and even powerful. There is a lesson here for writing: trying to get the beginning just right is a formula for failure—and probably a secret tactic to make yourself give up writing. Make some words, whatever they are, and then grab hold of that line and reel in as hard as you can. Afterwards you can throw away lousy beginnings and make new ones. This is the quickest way to get into good writing.

The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn't just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all the interruptions, changes, and hesitations between the consciousness and the page. In your natural way of producing words there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm—a voice—which is the main source of power in your writing. I don't know how it works, but this voice is the force that will make a reader listen to you, the energy that drives the meanings through his thick skull. Maybe you don't *like* your voice; maybe people have made fun of it. But it's the only

voice you've got. It's your only source of power. You better get back into it, no matter what you think of it. If you keep writing in it, it may change into something you like better. But if you abandon it, you'll likely never have a voice and never be heard.

Freewritings are vacuums. Gradually you will begin to carry over into your regular writing some of the voice, force, and connectedness that creep into those vacuums.

FREEWRTING AND GARBAGE

I find freewriting offends some people. They accuse it of being an invitation to write garbage.

Yes and No.

Yes, it produces garbage, but that's all right. What is feared seems to be some kind of infection: "I've struggled so hard to make my writing cleaner, more organized, less chaotic, struggled so hard to be less helpless and confused in the face of a blank piece of paper. And I've made some progress. If I allow myself to write garbage or randomness *even for short periods*, the chaos will regain a foothold and sneak back to overwhelm me again."

Bad writing doesn't infect in this way. It might if you did nothing but freewriting—if you gave up all efforts at care, discrimination, and precision. But no one asks you to give up careful writing. It turns out, in fact, that these brief exercises in not caring help you care better afterward.

A word about being "careless." In freewriting exercises you should not stop, go back, correct, or reflect. In a sense this means "be careless." But there is a different kind of carelessness: not giving full attention, focus, or energy. Freewriting

helps you pour *more* attention, focus, and energy into what you write. That is why freewriting exercises must be short.

If there is any validity to the infectious model of bad writing, it works the other way around: there is garbage in your head; if you don't let it out onto paper, it really will infect everything else up there. Garbage in your head poisons you. Garbage on paper can safely be put in the wastepaper basket.

In a sense I'm saying, "Yes, freewriting invites you to write garbage, but it's good for you." But this isn't the whole story. Freewriting isn't just therapeutic garbage. It's also a way to produce bits of writing that are genuinely *better* than usual: less random, more coherent, more highly organized. This may happen soon in your freewriting exercises, or only after you have done them for quite a number of weeks; it may happen frequently or only occasionally; these good bits may be long or short. Everyone's experience is different. But it happens to everyone.

It happens because in those portions of your freewriting that are coherent—in those portions where your mind has somehow gotten into high gear and produced a set of words that grows organically out of a thought or feeling or perception—the integration of meanings is at a finer level than you can achieve by conscious planning or arranging. Sometimes when someone speaks or writes about something that is very important to him, the words he produces have this striking integration or coherence: he isn't having to plan and work them out one by one. They are all permeated by his meaning. The meanings have been blended at a finer level, integrated more thoroughly. Not merely manipulated by his mind, but, rather, sifted through his entire self. In such writing you don't feel mechanical cranking, you don't hear the gears change. When there are transitions they are smooth, natural, organic.

It is as though every word is permeated by the meaning of the whole (like a hologram in which each part contains faintly the whole).

It boils down to something very simple. If you do freewriting regularly, much or most of it will be far inferior to what you can produce through care and rewriting. But the *good* bits will be much better than anything else you can produce by any other method.

KEEP A FREEWITING DIARY

If you are serious about wanting to improve your writing, the most useful thing you can do is keep a freewriting diary. Just ten minutes a day. Not a complete account of your day; just a brief mind sample for each day. You don't have to think hard or prepare or be in the mood: without stopping, just write whatever words come out—whether or not you are thinking or in the mood.

USING FREEWITINGS FOR FINDING SUBJECTS TO WRITE ABOUT

Simply do one or two. Afterward, look to see what words or passages seemed important—attracted energy or strength. Here is your cue what to write.

Or think of a person, place, feeling, object, incident, or transaction that is important to you. Do one or two freewriting exercises while trying to hold it in mind. This procedure will suggest a subject and a direction.

PRODUCING A FINISHED PIECE OF WRITING

Keep your topic in mind—or what you think your topic is—and do one or two freewriting exercises. If you are strict with yourself about never stopping for anything, which you must be, then you are likely to wander away from your subject sometimes. This is fine. You will waste energy and weaken your writing if you try to *prevent* digressions before they happen. Let them happen. After they happen, simply find an opportunity to put yourself back on the original subject. But in some cases you will realize that the digression is sufficiently engrossing or important that you should stick with it. Do so.

In either case, after the exercise take a few moments or more to rest and think about what you wrote. Think, too, about the digressions you started and perhaps continued. Notice when they occurred and where they took you. Think about their connections. Consider them as paths you should explore.

Then do another exercise and let these reflections enrich what you are writing. Do this three or more times. Each time you will thus be plowing more and more back into the new exercise. They will become richer. You may well find that your real subject turns out to be something quite different from what you originally thought your subject was. Fine.

After you have done three or four exercises that are more or less “on” what your subject turns out to be, you will have piles of rubble, but you will probably also have a lot of words, phrases, and sentences that seem important. Pick out these good bits. Strip away the rubble. *Now* use as much careful thought and editorial discrimination as possible in order to see what they add up to: decide how much you believe them,

how true they are, in what senses they are true; arrange them somehow so they make sense, and write new and connecting parts when necessary.

This may seem a wasteful method. You usually throw away much more than you keep. But for many people, it is really a *quicker, easier* way to produce a *better* short piece of writing.

This method is not foolproof. Sometimes you can only produce rubble—no good bits. This is particularly likely when you first start doing freewriting or during some period of your life in which you are in retreat. Don’t be anxious to get something good every time. The main usefulness of the exercises is not in their immediate product but in their gradual effect on future writing.