

On "Freewriting"

Compiled by Ann Staley 2/91

Formerly I used to think of my sentences before writing them down; but for several years I have found that it saves time to scribble in a vile hand whole pages as quickly as I possibly can, contracting half the words; and then correct deliberately. Sentences thus scribbled down are often better ones than I could have written deliberately.

Charles Darwin, THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY

It seems that many writers have discovered, learned about and used an important technique called FREEWRITING, and writing teachers from Peter Elbow to Sandra Perl to Natalie Goldberg to Annie Dillard now utilize this strategy as a way of generating ideas, as a way to fill that blank page which haunts them. Here's a brief description of freewriting: Nonstop writing where you write about whatever comes to mind. Don't worry about whether your writing is any good or even whether it makes sense; don't worry about spelling or grammar. If you can't think of the word you want, put down a squiggle. Just keep writing and see what comes. Changing topics is fine; try to follow your writing where it wants to go, and if you seem to run out of something to say, just write that you have nothing to say or write about how you feel at the moment or keep repeating the last word or sentence. More will come.

Natalie Goldberg calls this technique "practice writing," and here are some of her suggestions: keep your hand moving (don't pause to read the line you have just written), don't cross out even if you write something you didn't mean to write, don't think or get logical, lose control, go for the jugular. She says, quite rightly, that these first thoughts have tremendous energy; they are the first flashes on something which we often squelch, our own freshness and inspiration.

Freewriting may be PRIVATE or PUBLIC. If it's private you will not be asked to share it; if public you will be invited to share a part or all of it if you want to. Freewriting can also be FOCUSED. With focused freewriting you stay on a topic in order to explore the subject. This is a useful skill for the hardest stage in any writing assignment: getting started. The purposes of all three kinds of freewriting are to help you become comfortable and natural just SPEAKING YOUR THOUGHTS ONTO PAPER. Freewriting helps you get to the place where putting words on paper is as natural as speaking!! For most people this is the easiest exercise and yet the most powerful and versatile. I learn the most from it and find that other writers have had the same experience; it produces insights and new feelings and, for me, is a drive toward honesty. It's the way I get my mind down on paper; it is the texture of my experiencing.

Annie Dillard says it this way: "When you write, you lay out a line of words. The line of words is a miner's pick, a woodcarver's gouge, a surgeon's probe. You wield it, and it digs a path you follow. Soon you find yourself deep in new territory. Is it a dead end, or have you located the real subject? You will know tomorrow or this time next year."

Now, it's all very simple. The two main skills in writing are making a mess and cleaning up the mess. Freewriting in its various forms helps us make a mess, it helps us be open to lots of words and ideas, it lets us play with language, it lets us see and appreciate the complexity of our thinking, its like having dessert first!

Who will teach me to write? the writer wants to know. The page, the page.

Sources: Annie Dillard, THE WRITING LIFE, Harper & Row, 1989

Peter Elbow and Pat Belanoff, A COMMUNITY OF WRITERS: A
WORKSHOP COURSE IN WRITING, Random House, 1989

Natalie Goldberg, WRITING DOWN THE BONES, Shambhala, 1986