

Lesson Plan

Any of the questions below could be prompts for free-writing exercises. Peter Elbow defines freewriting as "private, non-stop writing" (85).

- Developing writers are not required to show what they've written to anyone.
- Since it is a free-writing exercise, writer is free to deviate or digress.
- Free-writers should not censor themselves: they can say whatever they like, and grammar, spelling, coherence are non-issues.
- Writers participating in this exercise do not need to be concerned with how good the writing is: it doesn't even need to make sense.

The only rule is that they have to keep writing for the prescribed time: five, ten or fifteen minute periods. A monitor or facilitator chooses the prompt and sets the time.

Elbow distinguishes between *pure* freewriting (described above), *focused* freewriting (where writers try not to digress unless the digression somehow informs the topic) and *public* freewriting (where writers are asked to be prepared to share with others whatever they have written) (86).

Rowena Murray suggests that free-writers write in complete sentences, expressing complete thoughts (88), and lists a number of uses for freewriting (94):

- As a warm-up for writing
- To look for topics
- To sift through topics
- To write in short bursts
- To get into the 'writing habit'
- To develop fluency
- To clarify your thoughts
- To stop yourself editing too soon
- To find or choose between topics
- To do incremental writing, in stages
- To increase confidence in your writing
- To overcome obstacles by articulating them
- To put the 'personal' voice into impersonal research

For our purposes, in this exercise, freewriting is used in order to encourage developing writers to explore their process and the feelings, thoughts, behaviours that accompany the process in its various stages and iterations and that sometimes prevent them from reaching their writing goals. Also, freewriting is used here to acknowledge the value of drafting—just putting ideas down on paper without wasting time or energy with audience-based concerns.

Below are questions that serve as prompts. The questions are specific to the interview with Donal Ryan. It is recommended that the facilitator either play the entire video for their class or else show the parts that are relevant to the questions assigned as prompts. Give one prompt at a time. It is

recommended that the writing session be followed by an opportunity to share thoughts or responses, either as a class, in small groups or in pairs.

Facilitators are free of course to come up with their own questions. What follows are samples.

1. Donal struggled to produce writing that he was happy with when he was writing in short bursts whenever time allowed. It wasn't until he established a daily regimen of 9pm to 12am, with a 500 word daily target, did he begin to produce work with which he was happy. Do you have a daily writing regimen? Is it working? If not, why not?
2. Donal Ryan speaks about finishing his first novel, *The Thing about December*, and launching straight into *The Spinning Heart*, saying that he wanted to take advantage of the momentum and discipline that got him through his first novel? Do you find it difficult to get a routine going when assessed writing is so sporadically assigned? What would make it easier to get a routine going, for instance, having assessed writing assignments and due dates specified in the syllabus at the beginning of the semester so that you could plan better? For postgrads publishing, how could you get a routine going?
3. Even after publishing two novels, Donal finds it difficult to see himself as a writer? Every day, you are reading articles and books by authors in your field and responding to them in papers you write. Do you see yourself as a writer? Do you see yourself as adopting the role of writer in future endeavours?
4. Donal fell off the wagon, in a manner of speaking, after publishing *The Spinning Heart*: he lost his rhythm, his routine. It was one of the effects of success. His response was to set a date on which he would get back on the wagon, getting back into his routine of writing 500 words a day between 9pm and 12am. When you get off-track, how do you get back on track? What is your strategy or strategies?
5. Donal employs a social strategy to advance his writing. He involves his wife, Anne Marie, in his writing process. He checks to see if freshly-written passages are working by monitoring her reactions to them. He says she is 'a natural editor', and he trusts her responses unreservedly. Do you have someone that you trust to bring into your writing process? Who is it and how does this person function to advance your writing?
6. Donal talks about deleting 20,000 words of *The Thing about December* that didn't logically follow the story line. When he realised his mistake, he deleted all 20, 000 words. Do you delete passages or do you save them to a notes page? How do you feel about deleting entire passages? What do you do when passages don't work and why?
7. Early and throughout childhood, Donal was an avid reader of books that were advanced for his age group. He was fascinated not only with the story, but with the way language can be used to produce an effect in the reader. He grew up wanting to emulate that skill. Were you an avid reader as a child? And did you ever wish you could write similarly to particular authors? Who were those authors and, from them, what did you learn about writing?
8. A sentence that Donal read in Joyce's *Ulysses* tormented him with the notion of perfection. For years, he could not find satisfaction with his sentences or paragraphs, knowing that they could be re-expressed in a multitude of ways, but never being able to settle because of the idea that it wasn't perfect. Finally, he came to accept that it will never be perfect, now, relying on the editor to locate passages that are not working. Do you get bogged down with perfectionism or feelings

that your writing is inadequate? How do you get past these or other negative thoughts about, or emotional responses to, your writing?

9. Donal draws on other writers' wisdom to guide how he proceeds. For instance, when asked about how he comes up with ideas for his novels, he refers to words of wisdom from John Boyne and Kevin Barry, which led to his approach to getting started: beginning with a vague idea and then 'not thinking too much about what you're writing as you write'. What are your strategies for getting started on a paper? What gets you going? What works for you?
10. When asked about whether he works on one novel at a time or several at once, Donal recommended working on one at a time. Do you work on more than one paper at a time? Does it work? What are some advantages and disadvantages?
11. When asked if his novels develop linearly, Donal responded that he writes 'fragmentarily', writing whatever part of the novel he was ready to write on the day. Joseph O'Connor says he cannot begin without knowing the end. What is your strategy? What works for you?
12. Donal talks about 'pacing the novel', which pertains to how his novels are structured, the arrangement of parts and the space taken up by each part. What influences the arrangement of ideas and the lengths of sections or passages in your papers?
13. Donal recommended a book on grammar and mechanics, *Grammar for Grownups*. Do you have resources that you use to check your grammar, mechanics and style? What are they, and how have they helped?
14. Donal's strategy for developing character's voices is to define the characters through their verbalised perceptions of the world around them. How do you define characters for readers? What are your strategies?
15. When asked how much he drafts his stories, he responded that he drafts as he goes, redrafting in chunks. This is consistent with his early experiences of over-writing passages. What is your drafting strategy? Do you edit parts of your paper while still drafting other parts of your paper? Or do you write the whole thing before you revise and edit? What is your strategy?

Works Cited

Elbow, Peter. *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.

Murray, Rowena. *How to Write a Thesis*, 2nd ed. Maidenhead, Birkshire: Open UP, 2006. Print.