

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 Stephen Kinsella. 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. “All economics”, says Stephen, “is actually rhetoric. It’s just persuasion.” What role does persuasion play in your discipline? What are the tools of persuasion in your discipline? Facts? Statistics? Theory? Consensus?
2. Stephen says that “writing is amazing because it allows you to clarify your thoughts”. Is this true for you? Do you understand what you are writing about better after you try to express it on the page than you did before you began writing it out?
3. Stephen says that “writing down the question in a very formal way...gets you to that answer”. Is this your experience? Do you find that you are continually returning to the question that motivated the paper, to revise the question, to be more precise about the question you are attempting to answer? And does doing so make it easier to answer the question set?
4. Stephen writes for multiple audiences. His approach is to keep in mind the people who might read his article and ask, “What is the simplest way I can say this thing so that X will understand it?” Do you write for multiple, diverse audiences? And what is your approach to satisfying the varied interests of your readers?
5. Stephen suggests writing in Economics is very inductive. You begin with specific cases and work toward generalisations. “[T]he way it works,” says Stephen, “we give you the model, and then we go, ‘Oh, by the way, here is a real world example of that.’ And you want to flip that on its head and go, ‘here’s the real world, and here’s what we’ve come up with to explain it’. How does it work in your discipline? Is it similar? Does your discipline begin with an instance and try to make generalisations based on what you find in a particular instance? Or do you begin with a generalisation and try to show how it is validated by a particular instance?
6. Stephen is impressed by the level of precision in astronomy, saying he’d love that level of precision in Economics. What is the level of precision in your discipline? How precise are forecasts in your field? Is precision valued in your discipline? Give some examples.
7. Stephen is always writing, carrying his laptop with him wherever he goes. His lectures are re-written in a few weeks in August. Thereafter, other than when teaching, he is having fun, part of which involves writing. Stephen does not only protect time for writing, but also for reading or anything else that immerses him in his discipline. When do you write? Do you have protected time? What prevents you from shutting your door and saying, ‘sorry, come back between 9 and 11 on Wednesday and we’ll talk’?
8. One of Stephen’s organisational strategies is to keep a list of things to do. He allots a time to complete the tasks listed, then gets on with the rest of his day. Lists might be good for completing writing tasks as well. How do you structure your time so that things that need doing (reading, writing, gathering data) get completed in a timely fashion?
9. Stephen works intensively with co-authors. He co-authors with many of his PhD students, but also with members of an international network of economists. Do you write with others? What is your experience of writing with others? And how does that experience differ from writing on your own? Which do you prefer?

10. When you co-author, who is the final editor? Why? Are there different levels of authority in the various co-authoring relationships? What are some of the roles do you play in those relationships? And how does playing those roles help you to become a better writer/editor?
11. Stephen does not feel that his academic and professional prolificacy benefitted in any way from some inherited rich social or cultural capital. Yet both his parents and both of his brothers are voracious readers. What is your childhood experience? What social or cultural capital did you inherit from your formative experiences? And how has this experience advantaged or disadvantaged you in your writing, do you think?
12. Stephen rails a bit against the formality of academic writing: "I always try to be as conversational as possible...I don't want to be, 'I am the professor up here' ... because it always switches people off". What are your feelings about academic writing? Are you uncomfortable with it, and does it hinder you in making your case to an academic audience or other audiences? Is a less formal style appropriate when making a case in your discipline?
13. Stephen talks about a conference paper, entitled Why'd you have to go and make things so complicated?, making the case that it is okay to have fun with your subject and with your readers or listeners. Do you allow yourself to have fun with your audiences? At what point do you perceive 'fun' as eroding your academic credibility?
14. One of the audience members talks about imposed restrictions on academics, what they can ask, what they can say, how they can say it, but most importantly, how widely they can range in your curiosity, 'those very fresh in the morning questions are what you want to really tackle, and the fear shouldn't, and just because it doesn't fit...'. Stephen recommends pursuing 'those fresh in the morning questions', making your case, but then separating that from what makes the case for your audience(s). He cites an example in which a 'very fresh in the morning question' led to the idea that a very important case could be made, but it required that he and his fellow researchers begin with a stupid assumption. They began with the stupid assumptions and, as they expected, it led to their case being made. Publishing, however, required that they defend the role of the stupid assumption. If they couldn't sell this point of departure, their audience wouldn't be persuaded. Have you ever been in this position, where you are giving value to an idea or concept or evidence that is not valued in your field in order to make a case in your field? How did you go about defending this unvalued concept?
15. Throughout the interview, Stephen has extolled the value of meeting audience expectations. One audience member asks what you do when your arguments make a case that goes against the consensus in your discipline. Stephen confesses that most of what he does goes against the grain of audience expectations. Stephen recommends that a person "craft it as if [you] have to defend it in a court of law". What is your strategy for arguing against the grain? Do you avoid taking on those positions? Stephen makes a living at it. Do you see any advantage to arguing against the grain in certain instances?

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, Berkshire: Open UP, 2006. Print.