

Making ⇌ Writing

**USING WRITING TO SUPPORT
YOUR CREATIVE PRACTICE**



INTRODUCTION TO FREEWRITING

Threshold Concepts: Writing is a knowledge-making activity

We often talk about what writing is—a text, a product, a burden, a chore—but less about what writing does. Writing is not just a way to record ideas or present them to another person or people; writing also helps us create ideas. Writing, the best writing, reveals to us things that we didn't even know we knew. Through writing, we can make connections and come to understand things that were just fuzzily hovering in our subconscious. Writing about them brings them to the surface and makes them visible.

But not all writing lets us access this “writing as thinking” superpower. Writing with your internal editor breathing down your neck or with prescribed rules about what your final product needs to look like disconnects writing from thinking. So our goal today is to introduce you to some techniques that re-connect writing to thinking, so that writing can become or be another tool in your toolbox for how you understand what you make and why you make it.

The first of these, and one of the most widely known and used techniques is freewriting.

Pioneering writing teacher Peter Elbow—back in the 1970s—wrote a groundbreaking book called “Writing without Teachers” in which he explains the principles of “freewriting”: The idea is simply to write for 10 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 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 ... The only requirement is that you never stop. (3)

The idea behind freewriting is that we put aside, for 10 minutes, all the things that get between writing and thinking. The editor, the perfectionist, worries about the future reader. For those 10 minutes, there is just your hand moving across the page generating words--and with those words, ideas.

ACTIVITY #1: WHAT AM I?

Think of an object that is important to you personally: a childhood toy, a favourite tool, an indispensable kitchen appliance. Without naming that object or otherwise identifying it, use freewriting to write as much description about your object as possible. You might write about colour, shape, texture, weight, sound, smell, feel, temperature ... the possibilities are endless.

Your partner will have to sketch or otherwise visually represent your object using nothing but your words for clues, so keep that pen moving.

The Language of Formal Analysis (aka. really good description for art + design)

Threshold Concepts: Writing is a way of enacting disciplinarity

Every field of study or discipline develops its own language (sometimes called jargon) and forms of communicating through writing (called genres). In the field of art, the formal analysis is one genre that forms the core of writing about your own work. The process book plays a similar role in design.

Because we are focused today on descriptive writing in particular, we are going to use the language of formal analysis as a way to reconsider how you can approach writing about your own work.

ACTIVITY #2: IDEA GENERATION

How many factors / criteria can we collectively think of to consider for describing an object or image in our respective disciplines?

Introduction to Inkshedding (aka. collective freewriting +/or looped freewriting)

Threshold Concepts: Writing is a social activity

About 15 years after Peter Elbow articulated the idea of freewriting as we know it today, a group of Canadian writing teachers developed an extension of freewriting now known as “inkshedding”. In an inkshedding session, writers do 10 minutes of freewriting and then that writing is read by the other writers at the table who record their experience and the connections they make through reading. The readers make visible, through writing and other mark-making, their own experience of reading a writer's words.

Inkshedding combines two powerful forces—writing as thinking through freewriting AND writing as a primarily social activity intended to generate a conversation between writer and reader.

So often we think of writing as a solitary act—one that usually takes place in a garret or some other isolated place. But wherever writing takes place, it is still, fundamentally, a social act. We write because we have something we want to tell someone else. Even journal writing is often seen as writing to our future selves. We almost always have (or should have) an audience in mind for our writing, and inkshedding makes that audience visible and present.

ACTIVITY #3: INKSHEDDING

Using the criteria we developed above, spend 10 minutes freewriting about your plans for your practice for the coming year. When the timer rings, put your paper in the centre of the table.

Now take someone else's paper and spend a few minutes reading it. Underline or write notes in the margin about things that excite you or that you'd like to hear more about. At the end of the page, write any thoughts about either the plans or the practice. Keep doing this until you've responded to all the papers on your table.

Now pick up your own paper again. Take a few minutes to review people's comments, paying attention to the ideas that people were most excited about or to people's suggestions. Spend 7 minutes writing in response to one or several of these ideas.

Why scheduled daily writing?

Threshold Concepts: Writing is not natural; Learning to write effectively requires different kinds of practice, time and effort

If writing is connected to thinking, you can see why writing a lot would help—more writing = more ideas. More ideas = more creativity. More creative output = more things to write about. It's a virtuous circle.

In his book, *How to Write a Lot*, Paul J. Silvia reports on a study that compared the creative output of writers who wrote under one of three conditions:

- No writing except in emergencies
- Writing only when inspired
- Writing at every scheduled writing session, whether or not they felt inspired

The people who write during their scheduled writing time not only generated a lot more pages (3.5 x more than the spontaneous writers and 16 x more than the abstinent writers) but they also generated a lot more creative ideas. People who wrote on a schedule typically had creative ideas twice as often as people who wrote when they were inspired, and five times as often as people who didn't write at all (Silvia 24-25).

Routine and habit are more important indicators of a writer's success than inspiration. Connect to Twyla Tharpe's *Creative Habit*.

REFERENCES

Naming What We Know: Threshold Concepts about Writing Studies. Eds. Linda Adler-Kassner and Elizabeth Wardle. Utah State UP, 2015.

Writing without Teachers, 2nd ed. Peter Elbow. Oxford UP, 1998.

What is Inkshedding? Russell A. Hunt. <http://people.stu.ca/~hunt/www/whatshed.htm>.

The Creative Habit, Twyla Tharpe. Simon & Schuster, 2006.

ACTIVITY #4: SQUARES OF INFLUENCE

Fold a paper in half and then in half again. You now have a page with four quadrants. Write a title above the top two squares that says "who"; write a title above the bottom two squares that says "when."

In the top-left quadrant, write about who your work comes from. Who would your work be friends with? Who are your works' relations? In the top-right quadrant, write about who would not like your work.

In the bottom-left quadrant, write about when your work comes from. Which time periods, historical moments, etc. would recognize your work? In which times would your work belong? In the bottom-right quadrant, write about when your work would feel very out of place.

KEY TAKEAWAYS:

1. Writing is connected to thinking
2. Writing generates inspiration, not the other way around
3. Writing can be(come) part of your making practice
4. Writing doesn't have to be right to be valuable

METHODS WE'LL EXPLORE:

- Freewriting
- Inkshedding
- Descriptive writing
- Timed writing (pomodoro)
- Scheduled daily writing