

PREWRITING AND FREEWRITING

It's All in a Name

Lou Spaventa and Denise C. Mussman

Levels	<i>Any</i>
Aims	<i>Ice breaker to get to know each other</i> <i>Practice pronunciation, spelling, writing, and face-to-face communication</i> <i>Participation in a nonthreatening, student-centered writing class</i>
Class Time	<i>30–40 minutes</i>
Resources	<i>Chalkboard or computer overhead screen</i>

Students often go through a whole course without knowing most of their classmates' names. The first class meeting is the time to create synergy and set a personal and communicative agenda by getting students to focus on language that belongs to them—their names. You can help set the tone for the class by having the students lead you toward the correct pronunciation of their names. This activity, as a first exercise in a writing class, lends itself to face-to-face communication and has a high probability of communicative success. The accomplishment, though seemingly simple and pedestrian, is real and useful, not least because it recognizes the importance of a person's name and the value of honoring students as individuals. Furthermore, it empowers students to learn to ask for repetition and to correctly pronounce the spelling of letters.

PROCEDURE

1. Review pronunciation of the letters of the alphabet. If the language is American English, be sure to pronounce the γ at the ends of *A, B, C, D, E, G, I, J, K, P, T, V,* and *Z*, and the *w* at the ends of *O* and *U*. Also, *H, Q, R, L,* and *X* are hard to pronounce and may require extra practice. A possibility is to have each student say a letter of the alphabet and when a student mispronounces one, have the entire class repeat the correct pronunciation after you and make them start again with *A*. Remind them that they need to spell words with equal stress.



2. Ask all of the students to come to the board and write their first and last names.
3. Pronounce each name and ask that person to give you feedback on your pronunciation. Keep going until each person gives some sort of positive feedback on your pronunciation.
4. Ask students to try to pronounce any names of their classmates that they find to be different for them. Practically, this means names of students from dissimilar cultures, such as a Mexican student trying to pronounce a Vietnamese name. Again, have the student whose name it is give feedback.
5. Have a few students practice spelling their names using equal stress on the letters. Be sure to write “How do you spell it?” on the board. Then discuss questions used in small talk that people ask in order to get to know someone. Have students dictate these and write questions on the board, which may include: Where are you from? What do you like to do? Do you have any brothers and sisters? What is your major/job? What is your favorite food?
6. Tell students that they must move around the classroom and ask 10 other students for their first and last names. They need to ask “How do you spell it?” and then ask a small-talk question but not the same one more than twice during the activity. If time permits and the class size is less than 20, have every student learn everyone’s name and something about the person.
7. If the class has mixed nationalities, instruct students that half of the students they talk to must be from cultures and countries different from their own. For example, a Japanese student would need to have at least 5 non-Japanese students in their list of 10 names.
8. Students write notes on information they learn about each classmate.
9. After students have written down their names and information, stand in a circle. One student at a time stands forward. The others say his or her name and information that they learned.

CAVEATS AND OPTIONS

1. Especially at lower levels, you might want to write the alphabet on the board to refer to during the exercise.
2. Again, especially at lower levels, you might want to provide a list of pertinent questions and requests for students to use in the exercise. For example:
 - a. What’s your name? (Explain that final intonation goes down the first time, and when asked the second time or for clarification, it goes up.)
 - b. How do you spell your first name?
 - c. How do you spell your last (family) name?
 - d. Please repeat that.
 - e. Say that again, please.
 - f. Did you say *A* /ey/ or *E* /iy/?

It All Started With an Apple

Alice Gertzman

Levels	<i>Intermediate +</i>
Aims	<i>Think creatively, exploring multiple uses of an image in writing</i> <i>Develop strategies for fluency, speed, free flow of ideas</i> <i>Reveal observations of students' styles of writing</i>
Class Time	<i>45 minutes</i>
Resources	<i>One whole, fresh, shiny apple per student</i>

Prewriting or invention strategies help students access their existing knowledge about a topic before they begin to plan an essay. This activity is based on the technique of freewriting, or looping, in which writers set to paper everything that comes into their heads, no matter how loosely connected, for a set period of time. One objective is to free the writers from the constraints of structure and to encourage a period of free association of ideas. A second objective is to help students discover the many possible directions in which a topic may be developed.



PROCEDURE

1. Bring to class a bag full of apples and give one to each student, along with a paper towel or napkin. Give the students these directions:
For today's activity, you need to have a pen or pencil and some paper. I have given you an apple—and that is your writing topic for the next 15 minutes. When I tell you to begin, you will start writing about your apple. You may write anything that comes into your head, and you do not need to worry about spelling, grammar, or style. The only rule is that you may not stop writing, not even to think. If you cannot remember a word in English, just write the word in your language and keep writing. If your mind goes blank, write the words "I can't think of anything to write" over and over until at last you think of something else to write. Remember: Your pen or pencil must keep moving across the paper for the entire 15 minutes; do not stop writing.

2. When you are certain that everyone understands the instructions, give the signal to begin writing. During this activity, if students ask what they should do with their apples, I try to be noncommittal by shrugging my shoulders and not responding.
3. While the students write, you may elect to write about the apple also. Writing with one's students is a well-respected way of demonstrating the value of the task and of discovering one's own response as a writer to the work. Often, however, instead of writing about the apple, I stand or sit to one side of the room with a pad of paper and a pen, and I take ethnographic notes about the students' actions as they write, noting where they put the apples, who eats the apples and who does not, what their individual writing and apple-munching habits are, and so on. I try to write something about each student in the class and to find patterns in their behavior.
4. When 15 minutes are up, ask the students to reread silently what they've written and then to write a single sentence that summarizes or otherwise says something important about what's on their paper. Then tell them to continue writing for another 10 minutes. (This step can be omitted if time is short.)
5. At the end of this 10 minutes, stop the writers again and tell them to put their pens down.
6. At this point, I reveal my role as an ethnographer, and I tell them about my observations. I describe their different writing styles: some sit very still, moving only the fingers of their writing hand; some shift position frequently and run their fingers through their hair or jiggle their feet or engage in some similar manifestation of nervous energy; some eat their apples with gusto; and others hold the apples delicately in their laps or abandon them on an adjacent desk. My goal is to call attention to the variety of valid ways in which people think and work and write; later we may continue this thought by surveying the students' homework habits too. Another benefit of this part of the activity is that it allows students to decompress a bit from the intensity of their concentration on writing.
7. After everyone has laughed and relaxed, I ask for volunteers to read all or part of what they've written. Usually, in spite of some early hesitation, everyone ultimately agrees to share his or her apple writing. The outcome here is unpredictable: I have laughed, cried, applauded, and sat in stunned silence, listening to the endless variety of the students' connections. Invariably, the entire class is deeply impressed by the awesome diversity of the responses. We celebrate the creativity of the work, and we brainstorm about ways to develop these writings into full essays. I leave it up to the students to decide individually if they want to work further on this topic; there are always some who do.

PREWRITING AND FREEWRITING

Finding Wild Mind

Christine B. Root

Levels	Beginning +
Aims	Relax and enjoy writing by focusing on ideas rather than mechanics
Class Time	15 minutes
Resources	Pencil and paper or computers, topic



Natalie Goldberg (1990) writes about Zen and the art of writing in *Wild Mind: Living the Writer's Life*:

That big sky is wild mind. I'm going to climb up to that sky straight over our heads and put one dot on it with a Magic Marker. See that dot? That dot is what Zen calls monkey mind or what western psychology calls part of conscious mind. We give all our attention to that one dot. Thus, when it says we can't write, that we're no good, are failures, fools for even picking up a pen, we listen to it. We need to give ESL students techniques to help them relax, get their thoughts to flow, and write with confidence. There is plenty of time later to edit. (p. 31)

PROCEDURE

1. Give students the theoretical underpinnings and goals of this type of writing activity as outlined above.
2. Tell students that they will write for 10 minutes without stopping and that their hands will probably hurt because this is a long time to write without stopping.
3. Present the following "rules" for writing practice (Goldberg, 1990), and thoroughly review these rules with students. (If possible, play beautiful background music while the students write.)
 - a. Keep your hand moving. Don't stop. The purpose of this is to keep the editor and the creator from becoming mixed up. "If you keep your creator hand moving, the editor hand can't catch up with it and lock it."

- b. Lose control. "Say what you want to say. Don't worry if it's correct, polite, appropriate. Just let it rip."
- c. Be specific. "Not car, but Cadillac. Not fruit, but apple. Not bird, but wren."
- d. Don't think. Find wild mind.
- e. Don't worry about punctuation, spelling, or grammar.
- f. You are free to write the worst junk in the world.
- g. Go for the jugular. "If something scary comes up, go for it. That's where the energy is." Have students mine the gems of the writing practice exercise to find something that they can work with and develop. Now is when students should edit, revise and rewrite so as to produce a "finished" piece. (pp. 2–4)

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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- Root, C. (1991, Winter). From monkey mind to wild mind. *MATESOL Newsletter*.

Write or Die!

Jingjing Wei

Levels	<i>Intermediate and advanced</i>
Aims	<i>Practice freewriting</i> <i>Overcome writer's block</i> <i>Lessen thinking in the first language while writing in English</i> <i>Have fun with technology</i>
Class Time	<i>70 minutes</i>
Preparation Time	<i>1 hour</i>
Resources	<i>Write or Die application</i> <i>Access to internet</i> <i>iPads</i>

For most ESL students and even well-trained writers, the hardest part of writing is writer's block, or getting started. Educators agree that the best way to overcome it is to practice freewriting. Freewriting happens when you set a limit and then write whatever comes to mind. Jacobs's (1986) interpretation of the nature of freewriting has underlining perspectives that include focus on content, writing freely without stopping, and not worrying about form—just writing. It is generally assumed that once students know how to start, it usually comes naturally and writing starts to flow. However, in a real ESL classroom, freewriting is easier said than done. Writer's block will often happen to those who are reluctant or hesitant writers or others who are perfectionists, feeling compelled to correct themselves all the time. In order to remedy these problems, this interesting and effective lesson utilizes the fun nature of the Write or Die iPad application and the theory of negative reinforcement to encourage students' freewriting in a timely fashion.

PROCEDURE

Before Class

Learn how the Write or Die application works. It is a negative reinforcement writing tool that forces users to write by providing consequences for distraction and procrastination.

To set up the program, you start by setting a word count goal and time limit for the given writing task, which gives students the deadline. Then you select appropriate consequence modes and the grace period according to the proficiency of students and the difficulty of the writing. After setup, a click on "write" will bring you to an empty text box with time and word count underneath.

Specifically, the grace period ranges from "forgiving" (about 15 seconds) and "strict" (about 10 seconds) to "evil" (roughly a second or two). The four increasingly severe consequence modes are "gentle," "normal," and "kamikaze." Gentle mode opens up a pop-up reminder to warn writers to get back to work. Normal mode triggers an unpleasant sound buzz until the writer resumes writing. Kamikaze mode will eat the written work if the writer goes over the grace period.

After they are finished writing, users can export their writing to Dropbox, email, Clipboard, or a text file.

Based on the difficulty level of the task and the proficiency level of the students in this lesson, the grace period of "evil" and the consequence of kamikaze mode are chosen. In this mode, whenever students stop typing into the text box for longer than a second, they will first be warned by blinking red color around the text box. Eventually, if no more words are typed after 5 seconds, the program starts eating words about a second at a time from the end of the work going backward. Basically, if students don't continue writing, anything they wrote will be gone. Instead, if they complete within the time limit, there are no negative consequences. A tangible punishment like this could be really challenging and amusing. With time ticking away and the danger of kamikaze mode, students have no choice but to write as much as possible in a timely manner.

In Class

1. Prewriting: In this stage, make sure students are comfortable using the application. Meanwhile, present the stimulus or open-ended prompts to help students start writing. Introduce the feature of the Write or Die application and explain how to use it. Ask students to play with it by setting its grace period to "evil" and consequences to kamikaze mode, while setting the word goal as 500 and time goal as 30 minutes. Be sure to troubleshoot any possible technical problems, and make sure students are all clear about how to

use the application. Present the prompts through a visually appealing manner to inspire thinking. For example, ask students to write about environmental issues by showing a picture of a ravaged forest with all the trees cut down or a deserted lake filled with garbage and with gas coming out from it.

2. While writing: Divide the class into two competitive teams, and ask students to nominate a name for their team. Emphasize that freewriting does not mean translating or copying existing sources. Remind students that they do not have to be perfect in this writing task; they just have to complete the task by writing down whatever comes to their mind.

Have students start freewriting on the topic of environmental issues. Encourage them to write anything that comes to their minds and complete a writing of 500 words in 30 minutes. Walk around to ensure that students are not correcting or wasting time checking the dictionary, copying other resources, or talking with others.

Count how many students survive the kamikaze mode and eventually complete the writing. The group which has the most survivors wins.

Reward the winning team with prizes. Many dollar stores have thesauruses, little notebooks, small dictionaries, and other inexpensive items that encourage writing skills.

3. Postwriting: In order to better help students formulate thoughts and generate ideas after freewriting, you could organize a postwriting activity. For example, within each team, “survivors” and “victims” work together as a collaborative writing center. The victims share what makes them run into writer’s block while the other members give them feedback and help brainstorm ideas. Then the survivors read their essay and share strategies on how to start writing in an efficient manner and how they expand on their ideas. By doing so, most students will come to recognize the nature of freewriting. Because different survivors will have essays focusing on different perspectives, all the students get to learn from each other.

CAVEATS AND OPTIONS

1. Students need to have basic skills operating iPads before this lesson is given.
2. Check equipment carefully before starting class.
3. To lower students’ writing anxiety, modify the topic so that they could write about their hobby, dream, ambition, experience, or other familiar topics that interest them.

4. To inspire thinking and help students start writing, you could use different ways to present stimulus or open-ended prompts, such as providing a quotation, short stories, sayings, or playing music or video segments.
5. Because beginning-level students are more likely to feel frustrated in timed writing, you could adjust the time limit, word goal, and consequences to fit students’ level (e.g., switch from kamikaze mode to gentle mode or normal mode).
6. For advanced-level students, you could increase the difficulty by adjusting the consequence mode or increasing the difficulty of the topic.
7. In order to show how freewriting should be different with drafting and editing, you could also freewrite along with students and share your writing with them. By showing your stream of consciousness to students, you help students realize that the freewriting stage does not require outline, dictionary, or paraphrase.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

- Jacobs, G. (1986). Quickwriting: A technique for invention in writing. *ELT Journal*, 40, 282–290. Doi: 10.1093/elt/40.4.282
- Printy, J. (2013). *Write or die: Putting the “prod” in productivity*. Retrieved from <http://writeordie.com/#iPad>

Silent Brainstorming

Lionel Menasche

Levels	<i>Intermediate +</i>
Aims	<i>Generate ideas using a cooperative, written approach in class</i> <i>Practice freewriting and controlling ideas</i>
Class Time	<i>15–20 minutes</i>
Resources	<i>Large file cards (or sheets of paper)</i>

This activity helps student writers generate ideas for topics that they have chosen but not thought much about. It invokes cooperative learning and peer input analogous to brainstorming; its freedom, creativity, and lack of inhibition are of great value in prewriting. By doing this activity—silent (written) brainstorming—every student writer gets some input on his or her topic from several others, and every student contributes in an intensive way. At the start of the prewriting phase, the writer of the essay receives many written comments and questions, some of which may turn out to be valuable stimuli.

PROCEDURE

1. Distribute a file card to each student. Instruct the students not to put their names on the cards. Tell each student to write her or his new topic at the top of the card, followed by one brief statement about any aspect of the topic that might be developed in the essay. In other words, they should write the topic and a controlling idea. (You may need to demonstrate this on the board or overhead screen.)
2. Have the students hand the cards to you. Shuffle them and distribute them randomly around the class. Inform the class that a student who gets his or her own card must treat it as if it were a card from another student, to maintain anonymity as much as possible.
3. Tell students that they will have 1 minute in which to read what is on the card and write a comment or a *wh-* question about it immediately below the statement written by the originator of the card. (You can also write this

instruction on the board.) Emphasize that the comment or question must in some way be related to the topic, but it does not have to be too closely related, so that there is scope for free and creative thought on the part of the person reading the card. Also, tell students that you will not read or grade these cards, which will be returned directly to their originators. This ensures that the students feel they are giving input to a peer, not to the instructor, and they feel less inhibited. Remind them to write legibly.

4. After about a minute (you can tell when most students have finished writing), instruct the students to pass their card to the person on his or her right.
5. Repeat Step 3 again and again. Announce that each successive reader may also write questions or comments about the questions or comments of preceding readers. Occasionally remind students to let their imaginations go so that their peers will have fresh and interesting ideas to work on. Gradually increase the time permitted for reading the cards and writing on them to 2 minutes, to allow for the increasing number of comments and questions on each card.
6. When you judge that there are enough questions and comments on the cards, collect them and distribute them to their originators by calling out the topic, which students can use to identify their own cards. Ten questions or comments usually provide enough food for thought for the authors.
7. Instruct the student writers to reflect carefully on the input from their peers and to use their questions and comments as springboards for further idea development. Make it clear that it is entirely up to them, as authors, to make use of or ignore the peer input when drafting their essays.

CAVEATS AND OPTIONS

1. Use sheets of paper instead of large file cards.
2. Have students write their names on the cards if you feel there is no need to preserve anonymity.
3. Instead of stopping the activity after a specific number of comments or questions, stop only when all students have written on each card.
4. This activity could also be done on a class website outside of or during class, such as a Discussion Board on Blackboard or a class blog. However, participation may be limited if done outside of class.

PREWRITING AND FREEWRITING

Cube It!

Denise C. Mussman

Levels	<i>Any</i>
Aims	<i>Develop and expand ideas</i> <i>Overcome writer's block</i> <i>Promote critical thinking and instill confidence</i>
Preparation Time	<i>10 minutes</i>
Class Time	<i>30–45 minutes</i>
Resources	<i>A white box, or one wrapped in white paper, and a marker for each student (or create the sides of the box on a handout for students to cut out and tape)</i>

Cubing as a teaching technique has been used widely in many subjects because it is useful to generate ideas on any topic. It's an extension of Bloom's Taxonomy.

PROCEDURE

1. Write one of these instructions on each side of the box:
 - Describe it. Try to use all five senses. How does it look, feel, taste, smell, or sound?
 - Analyze it. What is it made of?
 - Apply it. How can you use it? What effects does it have on people?
 - Associate it. What does it remind you of? Make a list.
 - Compare and contrast it. What is it similar to? How is it different from other things?
 - Argue for or against it. List reasons why it is good or should exist. What are reasons against it?

2. Ask a student to lend you a quarter or any coin used in the country where you teach. Hold it up and ask students whether they can write an essay about it. If they shake their heads, promise them that it can be done.
3. Now, we “cube” it. Using the sides of the box (or the board, if the questions are written there), students discuss answers to each side in pairs and then write nonstop for 10 minutes. Pass the box around the room or show each side one at a time in front of the class. Afterward, students share their ideas with the class. It is fun how much we can write about a quarter. Typical discussions include the following:
 - *It is round, hard, and made of silver.*
 - *There is a copper lining.*
 - *It has a picture of George Washington on it and words that say . . . and mean . . .*
 - *We can use it to buy things, do laundry, and pay for parking, vending machines, candy and toy machines at grocery stores, rides for children, arcade games, etc.*
 - *It is similar to a nickel; its size is too close to a dollar coin; it is being replaced with cards.*

At this point I tell students that if they can write that much about a quarter, there is much more they can write about their topics.

REFERENCES AND FURTHER READING

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- Spack, R. (2006). Cubing. In *Guidelines: A cross-cultural reading/writing text* (3rd ed., pp. 57–59). Cambridge, England: Cambridge University Press.