



SET YOUR WRITING

Free

Use this technique to
spark creativity and
loosen your inhibitions

BY BARBARA DEMARCO-BARRETT

WHILE THE BLANK page and the lack of time are both obstacles to writing, there's another, more insidious threat to the beginning writer: perfectionism. For some reason, new writers believe they should be better than they are, that the words should flow perfectly from the start, that they should always have lots of ideas waiting to be used.

See if this sounds familiar: You sit down to write and as the words begin to flow, you start to judge them. You cross out words or delete them. You fuss with sentences before they've even been written, and then beat yourself up for not being good enough.

In my classes, I see that women have a bigger problem with this than men do, perhaps because we tend to be harder on ourselves. You need to learn to quiet that internal critic so you can be creative and allow whatever wants to come out to come out. Revision is critical—just not now. Once you have a draft, then it's time for revising—not before. This is where freewriting comes in.

Freewriting has been called many things: "writing practice," "stream-of-consciousness writing," "jump-starting," but these are all essentially the same thing. Freewriting is the act of writing nonstop for a pre-planned period of time. You don't stop to fix grammar, misspellings or sentence structure, or to reread what you're writing. You just keep your fingers moving.

And you don't need a computer or a room with a view. All you need is paper and a writing implement. A cheap old pen and notebook will do.

The Puritans may have considered freewriting self-

indulgent, but it's a constructive kind of indulgence. Rather than writing with a specific end in mind (pleasing an editor or your writing group, making money), you freewrite to loosen up, to feel good. Freewriting sparks the spontaneity and creativity that far too many people let languish from disuse. Who would want to be a Puritan when you can let your imagination soar and discover the fun, beauty and playfulness of your own words?

When my son Travis was 4, I hosted a freewriting group. On Tuesday nights, women writers gathered around my kitchen table with notebooks and pens. To set the mood, I turned off the overhead light and switched on two rice-paper lamps that sat on the counter. A candle flickered in the middle of the table and jazz played over the speakers. We drank green tea and chitchatted for a spell; then it was time to write. We each wrote a word or phrase on a slip of paper, folded it, and dropped it into a small heart-shaped tin used only for freewriting.

Someone then picked one or two slips of paper and said the words. For the first freewrite, we set the timer for five minutes. The timer is vital, as it serves as a sort of deadline that, paradoxically, allows you to forget about time.

On this particular evening, Sandy chose "lavender hour" and "not here," next to which the writer had written "all one sentence," meaning we had to write one long continuous sentence until the timer beeped, at which point we could use the imperious period.

Here's part of what I wrote:

At that magical hour betwixt darkness and light, the lavender hour, when visions of pussy willows and twigs of magenta bougainvillea dance in front of your eyes, and one thing blends into the next, this favorite time, magical purple time when, if I'm outside playing with Travis I have to stop because the ball loses its edges and Travis says, "Play ball, Mom, play," and I say, "Trav, I can't see the ball," but he doesn't hear this, won't pay attention to "No" and keeps saying, "Play ball, Mom," and I begin to believe that little children have better eyes, are like nocturnal creatures that see best in the dark, and the lack of light makes me feel here, but not here, relaxed in a way that means it's time to wind down, kick back, my butt wedged in Travis's little white resin chair on the back patio, I listen to the sounds of evening, the baby next door crying, her mother's soft reassuring voice, Brian in the kitchen, sautéing tofu, running water, other neighbors on their rooftop patio drinking wine and laughing ...

After the timer went off, we took turns reading. Serious comments are verboten, although spontaneous, positive reactions are fine. Three more timed writings—10 minutes, 15 minutes and a five-minute cooldown—and the entire freewriting practice took an hour and a half.

When you let go and practice freewriting a lot, over time you learn to stop thinking and trust the process, which is when your writing flows easily. Not all freewriting involves writing "all one sentence," but doing so encourages you to become loose and fluid. Freewriting is a superb inhibition remover. When you don't stop to think about what you're writing, your concern about whether it's good or bad vanishes, and you begin to enjoy the process of writing for what it is: the laying of words on a page.

If you're immersed in a project, you can freewrite to generate pages, as I occasionally did in writing *Pen on Fire: A Busy Woman's Guide to Igniting the Writer Within*. Barbara Seranella, author of the bestselling Munch Mancini mystery series, told my Los Angeles radio audience that the scenes in her books often begin in freewriting.

"At a recent library event," Seranella says, "I told the story of when the freewriting prompt word was 'God.' We had 20 minutes to write. After 10 minutes, I exhausted what I had to say about Munch and her

feelings about God. Since I had 10 minutes left and was supposed to keep going until the timer went off, I wrote about the detective Mace St. John's feelings about God. I ended up using that scene in my third book, *Unwanted Company*. I would never have thought of doing that otherwise. Freewriting freed me to explore other angles of my story."

If you're working on a story or an essay, try freewriting with your characters or topic in mind. It doesn't matter whether you end up using what you write or not. Freewriting is about taking your writing to that loose, languid place where anything goes. It's the nudist camp for words where your writing self goes to let it all hang out.

SET YOUR TIMER

On slips of paper, write evocative words or phrases, fold them, and store them in a small container. I like using a miniature bonbon tin from France. It closes tightly and travels well in briefcases and totes.

Then, alone or with someone, pick a time when you're relaxed and ready to have fun. Choose a word or two and set the timer for five minutes. Write whatever comes into your head. Disregard your internal editor's opinions: "Tsk,

tsk, dangling participle, misspelled words, tense change ..."

Just write. And don't stop until the timer goes off. If you're with others, take turns reading aloud, without comment.

If you're alone, read it over silently—or aloud—then set the timer for a longer period, pick a few words, and have at it again.

Like most things in life, the main thing about starting to write is to stop dreaming and do it. Freewriting is a way to make this possible.

If you have trouble putting words on the page, use freewriting to get fired up. If you're stuck, freewrite.

If you want writing to be fun again, freewrite. Allow your subconscious to take you on vacation every day. #

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