

WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

Purpose

The best way for a person to learn to write is to write; these exercises are designed to give you that needed practice. The assignments are intended to help you develop "scribal fluency"--that is, to help you be more comfortable and confident when you write. They should help you improve your ability to select and narrow a topic and to develop it coherently. In addition, they should teach you to use writing as a means of exploring your ideas. Furthermore, they will give you practice in producing polished writing. Each of the four Writer's Notebook assignments will help you work on at least one of these purposes. Thus, you will learn a good deal about writing--simply by doing it.

But writing, in itself, cannot teach anyone to write well. To be a good writer, one must be conscious of what is happening in the act of writing. Therefore, another major purpose of the assignments is to make you think about your writing--to help you learn to be your own critic. Accordingly, each assignment requires you to write a commentary of your writing for that assignment, including both an analysis and an evaluation.

Format

The Writer's Notebook assignment is divided into three parts, each of which should be written in ink in a separate 16-sheet blue book. These blue books (you will need 3 of them) cost 20¢ each and are available in bookstores around the campus. When you submit an assignment, you should write, on the cover of the blue book, your name, your teacher's name, and the number of the assignment. You should write on each line and on both sides of each sheet; an assignment of "two pages" requires that you write approximately 400 words--200 words per page.

Due Dates and General Requirements

You will receive specific instructions for each part of the assignment. Generally, you will be writing about two pages each weekday; the completed notebook (all four sections) must contain at least 71 pages.

Due January 31: Diary/Journal and Commentary

A daily record of thoughts and experiences (five days), plus a two-page commentary; total--12 pages.

Due Feb. 16 : Focused Writing and Commentary

A series of eight informal essays on topics of your choice (two pages each), plus a two-page commentary; total, 18 pages.

Due March 21 : Free Writing, Formal Paper, and Commentary

A series of rapid-writing sessions, a formal essay (three pages), and a two-page commentary; total, 23 pages.

Grading

Each part of the assignment must be accepted by your teacher. Your writing must show steady improvement throughout the semester, and all of the formal papers written for the last two parts of the assignment must be written at a high level, showing your command of the principles of writing covered in the course. Each assignment will be graded according to criteria which will be given to you when that assignment is made.

WRITER'S NOTEBOOK

Assignment #1 Diary/Journal

Your first Writer's Notebook assignment requires you to do two kinds of writing: description and evaluation.

1) Keep a diary or journal for five days, recording not only your experiences but also your moods and thoughts. Feel free to write whatever you want, as your teacher is honor bound not to reveal to anyone else what you write; however, you should bear in mind that someone other than yourself will read your diary. Within whatever limits you choose to impose upon contents, though, write as freely and as explicitly as you can. Since you're not writing to communicate with an audience, but rather recording your thoughts for yourself, you do not need to go out of your way to use standard conventions of writing such as standard spelling and punctuation; that is, let your thoughts lead you, and do not try to write an "essay" for each entry.

Write at least two pages per day, but do not stop at two pages if you have more than two pages to say. Similarly, you may write more than five entries if you wish.

2) After you have finished the journal assignment, write a commentary of at least two pages discussing it. Analyze what you have written and evaluate the possible usefulness of such writing to you as a writer. In doing so, you may want to consider questions such as--but not limited to--the following:

Why should/should not one keep a diary?

What subject(s) did I avoid in my journal? Why?

How did my knowing the teacher would read the journal affect what I wrote?

How might a private diary be different from the one I wrote?

How does this kind of writing differ from my writing in an essay?

Was doing the assignment difficult/easy? Why?

Did I learn anything from writing the journal? If so, what? Why?

The assignment is due January 31. Place your blue book in the appropriate box atop the filing cabinets.

NOTE:

- * Write ALL Writer's Notebook assignment in 20¢ blue books.
- * Write at least two pages for each part: a "page" of writing contains at least 200 words.
- * Write on the front and back of all sheets--save paper.
- * Use a pen; write legibly, please.
- * This assignment requires ten (10) pages of diary/journal and two (2) pages of commentary total, twelve (12) pages.

WRITER'S NOTEBOOK #2

(A reminder: Use a 16-sheet blue book. Assignment due Feb. 16)

Purpose

You may recall that, on the general assignment sheet, you were given two precepts which form the basis of the Writer's Notebook assignments: the best way for a person to learn to write is to write; to be a good writer, however, one must be conscious of what is happening in the act of writing. You'll note that the assignment below follows those precepts. The journal entries should serve to give you more of that needed experience in writing, and the commentary should help you develop critical skills.

This assignment differs from the first in that you are asked to write not about "what happened" on a given day but rather about what you think about a single topic.

The Assignment

Write a series of six (6) informal essays on different topics of your choice; each essay should be at least two pages long (remember, you may write on the front and back sides of each sheet). Differing from those in the first assignment, these essays should each be edited somewhat, using your newly acquired knowledge of sentence structure and mechanics. The main purpose of this assignment, though, is focus: use the writing to find out what you have to say about a topic. Accordingly, you should pay more attention to the exploration of a topic and the development of your ideas than to mere mechanics or revision. Choose topics that interest you but which you have not carefully explored. Do not necessarily limit yourself to "serious" topics, but choose something you know a little about, not something totally foreign to you.

Your paper need not develop a thesis (prove an opinion of worth), though you may write a paper which does that if you wish. Such papers require a studied opinion and need to be planned carefully before writing. The essays you write for this assignment, however, need not have such polish. Consider, rather, that they are notes to yourself about the topic you have chosen to write about.

Having finished your six informal essay, choose one and revise it into a good formal essay of about two pages. This formal essay should illustrate your command of the sentence patterns you have studied in the first part of this course. Do not worry about paper length so much as paper quality: strive for syntactic variety and rhetorical effectiveness.

After you have finished all seven essays, write a commentary of at least two pages. Discuss the assignment, assess its value (both positively and negatively), discuss your performance, evaluate your work, estimate its usefulness to you as a developing writer, etc. There is no "correct answer" to this part of the assignment; treat the matter seriously, though, and be sure to cite reasons for the opinions you state.

WRITER'S NOTEBOOK #3
English 306 Individualized Instruction

Read the attached essay by Peter Elbow. Do it now.
DO NOT READ ANY FURTHER UNTIL YOU HAVE READ THE ELBOW ESSAY.

Your writer's notebook will be a modified freewriting-and-revision exercise. With the philosophy of Elbow's suggestions firmly in mind, complete the following assignments:

1. Establish a topic about which you have strong opinions, one which you think you can write about well. You may use one of the topics from the last writer's notebook which was not rewritten, if you wish.
2. In your new blue book, ----on different days, do two freewriting exercises about that topic. Elbow's comments are directed to writers who have little experience writing, so do not limit yourself to a ten-minute session; rather, use a fifteen-minute time limit. Try to use the freewriting as a time of discovery--getting to know what you know (you may recall the quotation usually attributed to W. H. Auden: "How can I know what I think 'til I see what I say?"). For an effective methodology, try the following:

freewriting

- *Choose a place to write where you will be comfortable, where you can remain undisturbed for fifteen minutes.
- *Do not look at a clock while you write, but arrange things so you will be alerted after fifteen minutes have passed (some people use the bell timer on the oven at home; others write in the library fifteen minutes before the class bell is to ring; others have someone else tell them when time's up).
- *Write continuously, not stopping for anything. If you seem to be running out of something to say, try asking yourself questions about the topic and answering them.
- *For this part of the assignment, do not correct errors or think about form--you can edit later. Rather, try only to say, or to arrive at, your clearest notion of the topic at hand.

the essay

3. Using the raw material of your two freewriting exercises, establish a good framework or general plan for a formal essay about the topic. Let what you know about the topic form the limits of your paper, but write at a least a four-page paper. Use what you know of good sentence and paragraph form in your paper. Your paper will be evaluated according to the criteria established in the handout distributed earlier, based on the content of this course.

(repeat)

4. When you have completed steps 1-3, above, repeat the procedure for another topic. Do two more freewriting exercises and another essay.

commentary

5. At the conclusion of the above, write a commentary and critique of the assignment, noting its goals, an evaluation of your performance, and an evaluation of the assignment, itself.

NOTICE:

this is the final writer's notebook assignment! it is due on Wednesday, March 21, after Spring Break.

PETER ELBOW

PETER ELBOW, born in 1935, was educated at Williams College and at Oxford, Harvard, and Brandeis universities. Now a member of the faculty at Evergreen State College, he previously taught at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Franconia College. He has had extensive experience directing writing programs in universities and for community groups. His articles have appeared in such publications as *College English*, the *Journal of General Education*, and *Change* magazine.

Freewriting

"Freewriting" (editor's title) is from Elbow's book *Writing without Teachers*. It is a simple example of "do-it-yourself" process—a process not all teachers of English will endorse. But the author's ample justification for the basics of his plan at least provides some solid grounds for agreement or disagreement.

The most effective way I know to improve your writing is to do freewriting exercises regularly. At least three times a week. They are sometimes called "automatic writing," "babbling," or "jabbering" exercises. The idea is simply to write for ten 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 can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, "I can't think of it." Just put down something. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. 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; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you never stop.

What happens to a freewriting exercise is important. It must be a piece of writing which, even if someone reads it, doesn't send any ripples back to you. It is like writing something and putting it in a bottle in the sea. The teacherless class helps your writing by providing maximum feedback. Freewritings help you by providing no feedback at all. When I assign one, I invite the writer to let me read it, but also tell him to keep it if he prefers. I read it quickly and make no comments at all and I do not speak with him about it. The main thing is that a freewriting must never be evaluated in any way; in fact there must be no discussion or comment at all.

Here is an example of a fairly coherent exercise (sometimes they are very incoherent, which is fine):

I think I'll write what's on my mind, but the only thing on my mind right now is what to write for ten minutes. I've never done this before and I'm not prepared in any way—the sky is cloudy today, how's that? now I'm afraid I won't be able to think of what to write when I get to the end of the sentence—well, here I am at the end of the sentence—here I am again, again, again, at least I'm still writing—Now I ask is there some reason to be happy that I'm still writing—ah yes! Here comes the question again—What am I getting out of this? What point is there in it? It's almost obscene to always ask it but I seem to question everything that way and I was gonna say something else pertaining to that but I got so busy writing down the first part that I forgot what I was leading into. This is kind of fun oh don't stop writing—cars and trucks speeding by somewhere out the window, pens clittering across peoples' papers. The sky is still cloudy—is it symbolic that I should be mentioning it? Huh? I dunno. Maybe I should try colors, blue, red, dirty words—wait a minute—no can't do that, orange, yellow, arm tired, green pink violet magenta lavender red brown black green—now that I can't think of any more colors—just about done—relief? maybe.

Freewriting may seem crazy but actually it makes simple sense. Think of the difference between speaking and writing. Writing has the advantage of permitting more editing. But that's its downfall too. Almost everybody interposes a massive and complicated series of editings between the time words start to be born into consciousness and when they finally come off the end of the

Freewriting

pencil or typewriter onto the page. This is partly because school makes us obsessed with the "mistakes" we make in writing. Many people are constantly thinking about spelling and grammar as they try to write. I am always thinking about the awkwardness, wordiness, and general mushiness of my natural verbal product as I try to write down words.

But it's not just "mistakes" or "bad writing" we edit as we write. We also edit unacceptable thoughts and feelings, as we do in speaking. In writing there is more time to do it so the editing is heavier: when speaking, there's someone right there waiting for a reply and he'll get bored or think we're crazy if we don't come out with something. Most of the time in speaking, we settle for the catch-as-catch-can way in which the words tumble out. In writing, however, there's a chance to try to get them right. But the opportunity to get them right is a terrible burden: you can work for two hours trying to get a paragraph "right" and discover it's not right at all. And then give up.

Editing, *in itself*, is not the problem. Editing is usually necessary if we want to end up with something satisfactory. The problem is that editing goes on *at the same time* as producing. The editor is, as it were, constantly looking over the shoulder of the producer and constantly fiddling with what he's doing while he's in the middle of trying to do it. No wonder the producer gets nervous, jumpy, inhibited, and finally can't be coherent. It's an unnecessary burden to try to think of words and also worry at the same time whether they're the right words.

The main thing about freewriting is that it is *nonediting*. It is an exercise in bringing together the process of producing words and putting them down on the page. Practiced regularly, it undoes the ingrained habit of editing at the same time you are trying to produce words. It's less blocked because words will come up more easily on more paper, but chew up fewer pencils.

Next time you write, notice how often you stop yourself from writing down something you were going to write down. Or else cross it out after it's written. "Naturally," you say, "it wasn't any good." But think for a moment about the occasions when you spoke well. Seldom was it because you first got the beginning just right. Usually it was a matter of a halting or even garbled beginning, but you kept going and your speech finally became coherent and even powerful. There is a lesson here for writing: trying to get the beginning just right is a formula for failure — and probably a secret tactic to make yourself give up writing. Make some words, whatever they are, and then grab hold of that line and reel in as hard as you can. Afterwards you can throw away lousy beginnings and make new ones. This is the quickest way to get into good writing.

The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn't just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all the interruptions, changes, and hesitations between the consciousness and the page. In your natural way of producing words there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm — a voice — which is the main source of power in your writing. I don't know how it works, but this voice is the force that will make a reader listen to you, the energy that drives the meanings through his thick skull. Maybe you don't like your voice; maybe people have made fun of it. But it's the only voice you've got. It's your only source of power. You better get back into it, no matter what you think of it. If you keep writing in it, it may change into something you like better. But if you abandon it, you'll likely never have a voice and never be heard.