

Freewriting

If you’ve identified a general topic area, or some of the ideas you’ve generated in your conversations and brainstorm lists interest you, try freewriting. The goal is to get your ideas written down without judging what you’re writing, or editing yourself, or trying to write beautifully. Experiment by making yourself write nonstop for ten to thirty minutes. As you keep your fingers moving, don’t worry about making sense or about readers being confused or impressed. No one is going to read this document but you. When you take away the pressure of producing smooth prose, you may be surprised to see the ideas you generate. We like to refer to this as a “shitty first draft.”

Advice for Freewriting

As you begin your rough or exploratory draft, remember that it is just for you. No one else ever needs to see it. Think of your draft not as an organized, perfect piece of writing with a clear purpose, but as a messy opportunity for creativity and experimentation.

Don’t worry about a thesis or about being logical or eloquent. Instead, focus on quantity rather than quality. That’s right: quantity, not quality. Think of words in the first draft as raw materials. You want as much raw material to work with as possible. Imagine an artist beginning a painting. Would she have only the exact amount of paint she needs to create her piece? What if she changes her mind midway through the painting and wants to use more yellow than red? Wouldn’t it make sense for her to begin with extra paint in each color to allow her the flexibility to modify her ideas? Writing and other kinds of composing are similar. Beginning with more words than you need gives you more options. Here are some pointers for getting your first draft written:

1. Set a timer for thirty minutes and force yourself to write for the entire time, not stopping for anything. That means no stopping to reread and correct or to refer to sources or models, and definitely no stopping to check Facebook.
2. Don’t stop to correct or edit what is on the page.
3. Write until you have five thousand words or you run out of time.

Don’t worry about grammar, punctuation, spelling, transitions, topic sentences, organization, titles, and so on. Don’t even worry about genre or what the finished piece will look or sound like. Once you have your thoughts down, you can think logically about your purpose, audience, and the points you want to convey.

At this stage, if you’re putting pressure on yourself to write flawless, beautiful prose, remind yourself of the term *freewrite*. Take a little more pressure off by thinking of Anne Lamott’s phrase “shitty first draft.” Everybody, including published authors, writes them. (See Anne Lamott’s essay in the Reader section of this book, on pp. 522–25.)

Let’s circle back to Amy’s student Gwen. Earlier in this chapter, we looked at the “Take a Position” assignment that Gwen responded to, followed by her brainstorm. Her thoughts on the assignment and her brainstorm led her to focus on superheroes and social attitudes. What position could she take on the relationship between the heroes and the values and prejudices of the real world? She began with this question:

TOPIC QUESTION FOR “TAKING A POSITION” ASSIGNMENT

To what extent do superheroes reflect real-world values and attitudes?

Gwen then moved from that question to a freewrite.

Guided Reading | Freewrite

Gwen began with some exploratory freewriting, a low-stakes method that allowed her to reflect on her experiences and solidify her thoughts about superheroes and social attitudes.

Gwen Ganow (STUDENT), *Topic for the “Take a Position” Assignment: Superheroes and Social Attitudes*