



# Writing Things Down Before Writing Things Up\*

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*Parts of this handout are taken directly from "Twenty Tips for Senior Thesis Writers (and other writers, too)," a handout written by Sheila M. Reindl, Ed.D., and available at the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University and at [bsc.harvard.edu](http://bsc.harvard.edu)*

Writers of research papers, senior theses, and dissertations often focus on writing up their research. But before we can write things up, we need to write things down. We need to write down the bits of observations, scraps of logic, and traces of associations that are all part of – and promoting of – a creative intellectual process.

## Associative logic and linear logic: you need both.

While our **final product** needs to convey our ideas via **linear logic** so that others can follow our line of thinking, we need to draw upon another kind of logic – our **associative logic** – to foster our **creative process**. Associative logic is the logic of dreams; our dream center pulls together seemingly disparate elements and associates them, or links them in some creative fashion. It is the logic that leads us to moments of insight, clarity, creativity that seem to come out of the blue – those flashes of creative connection or problem-solving that occur just before we fall asleep, just as we wake up, while we're in the shower, while we're driving, while we're walking to class. Associative logic is the logic at work in those generative, free-flowing conversations with a friend or colleague that lead us seemingly – yet not entirely – far afield from where we started. If we follow our mind's wanderings and associations far enough, they often lead to something creative and useful.

Neuroscience is teaching us that the mind literally works by association, by forming links between neurons. The neural circuits and networks that form are the biological basis of learning, of making new connections.

You can foster the creative process by **freewriting**, that is, by writing brief (five- to ten-minute), uncensored pieces aimed at letting you follow the playful, associative, non-linear logic of your mind. Often we don't follow that associative logic very far because we dismiss it early on as entirely illogical and useless. Freewriting serves to loosen your mind (like stretches before running).

Writing freely – without thinking about whether what we are saying is elegant or grammatical or concise or logical – promotes the generation of ideas and of creative connections between ideas. Think of freewriting as **soil, not seed**. Soil is the muck that nurtures a germinating idea rather than the perfect seeds that become the actual sentences and paragraphs of the final product.

## Do focused, or prompted, freewriting to get your associative processes rolling.

Sometimes freewriting works better with a focus and/or a running start. Consider using the following sentence stems as prompts for your freewriting. Complete the sentence and continue writing from there:

1. When I started this project, the thing that really interested me was . . .
2. The questions I find myself thinking about these days are questions like . . .

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\* This notion of writing things up versus writing things down comes from Abigail Lipson, Ph.D.

3. What I really want to know is . . .
4. I want to figure out how . . .
5. I have a hunch that . . .
6. I am confused by . . .
7. I feel angered or annoyed by . . .
8. What stands out to me about all the stuff I've been reading is this idea that . . .
9. What I've been reading makes me wonder . . .
10. Dialogue between me and the experts (this exercise comes from writing teacher Eileen Farrell):
  - This author/professor/theorist/expert says . . .
  - And/but I say . . .
  - He or she also says . . .
  - And/but I say . . .
11. If I had to put my project/paper so far into the form of a single question, it would be . . .
12. The observations I make that lead me to pose that question are . . .
13. What makes my question hard to reckon with or difficult to resolve is that . . .
14. One way in which I could attempt to reckon with that difficulty of how to resolve my question is . . .
15. If things were as neat and tidy as I'd like them to be, I would be able to make the argument that . . .
16. One way in which things aren't so neat and tidy is that . . .
17. One way in which I might address that messiness is . . .
18. I'm stuck. I'm stuck because I can't figure out . . .
19. I can see that my way of approaching my question has some real problems, or at least challenges, including . . .
20. One way I could possibly address that methodological/approach/design issue is . . .
21. I realize I need to define some terms. If I were to try to define the term \_\_\_\_\_, what occurs to me is that . . .
22. [A letter to a friend or to your reader] Dear \_\_\_\_\_, I'm trying to write this paragraph/section/chapter about \_\_\_\_\_. And do you know what? . . .
23. Let me state what I think I know so far, even if it seems obvious or self-evident (in the belief that sometimes it's actually easy to overlook the obvious and that sometimes the seemingly obvious deserves another look):
24. Of all these seemingly obvious, self-evident things, the one that keeps catching my attention is . . .
25. If I think of "theory" as simply another word for "explanation," I would say that one of the explanations that people have offered for the thing I'm researching is that . . .
26. But that theory or explanation doesn't seem to account for . . .
27. If I could say what I really want to say, . . .
28. If I could approach this project in the way I really want to, . . .
29. If I could write about the question that really interests me, . . .
30. What I wish I could convey to my audience is . . .

Write for just five to ten minutes, either at the computer or with pen and paper. The only "rules" are 1) **Do not stop writing** for those five to ten minutes and 2) **Do not censor or edit** as you freewrite. Editing a task distinct from generating, a task that comes later in the writing process.

## Priming the pump, promoting the process.

Associative logic has a short half-life. Associations are ethereal, evaporating quickly if we don't do something with them. We know this from everyday life. We wake up and recall a dream. "That was incredible," we say. "Surely I won't forget that." But if we don't do something with that dream – if we don't write it in a journal, or mention it to someone at breakfast, or review it in our mind – we forget much of it by lunch.

So it is with other associations. To promote your creative process, create two project journals, or intellectual journals, for the purpose of capturing and cultivating your associations: one on your computer (i.e., a folder for memos you write to yourself) as well as a hard-copy journal of some sort for hand-written entries (i.e., a notebook, manila folder, or big piece of paper on the wall). Use these to record thoughts about your project that come to you in moments when you're not at the computer. Great ideas don't always come at designated or convenient times, so you have to log them in as they arrive. You might do some of your most creative thinking in the spaces in between your official work sessions and end up jotting some of your best ideas on dinner napkins, the backs of old envelopes, scraps of paper, and receipts. Just make sure you have some place where you keep them all together. Some people simply staple these bits of paper with hand-scribbled notes into their hard-copy journal. Some people keep separate folders (virtual or manila or both) for each chapter and a catch-all folder for what writing instructor Larry Weinstein has called "gems without a setting," those ideas that sparkle but don't yet have a place of their own in our work.

What you might find is that the act of capturing and cultivating your associations actually helps your mind continue to make creative connections *even when you are not on task*. Freewriting not only primes the pump in the moment of writing; it promotes the mind's neural networking process even as we're busy doing other things. That is the process that explains why, after trying and trying and trying without success to solve some problem (e.g., how to best link two ideas in a paper, how to get from *a* to *b* in a math problem, what metaphor is most useful in a presentation, where to put the couch), we often come up with the answer when we are no longer directly focused on the problem. Our mind has been considering possibilities even when we were doing other things.

## Why bother freewriting – i.e., generating words and sentences that might not even end up in the final product?

It might seem as if freewriting is a supreme waste of effort. Why bother to write stuff that might not make it into the final product when it's hard enough just to get any decent sentences on paper?

Part of what makes it so hard for many of us to write is that we are perfectionists. While we might not produce perfect products, we aim for perfection. We believe that we should be able to write powerful, articulate, coherent – even brilliant – prose from the get-go. No doubt there are some writers in the world who can readily produce such impressive writing as a first – or even only – draft. But most of us can't. For most of us, our initial efforts at writing a piece are halting, uneven, inelegant, and humbling.

If we try to produce "perfect" prose from the get-go, we involve ourselves in a painstakingly slow and torturous process. And we might not even get our best work this way. Our sentences end up labored, stilted. Our paragraphs, while logical enough, seem dull. Our argument is uninspired.

Freewriting might take more time than the get-it-right-from-the-start approach. But then again, it might not. When we try to "write it right" from the start, we spend a good deal of time staring at a blank screen, agonizing, and avoiding our writing altogether because the process is so painful. But even if freewriting ultimately does involve more time on task, it allows the time we spend to be less painful and more playful.

We take it as a given that most performances – and writing is a performance – require a good deal of practice. Ice skaters take time and practice to choreograph and perform a new routine. One means by which they master a routine is to pick out some small piece of it and practice just that part. They practice their turns and transitions over and over and over. In practicing, they inevitably fall. Practice doesn't look perfect.

Pianists, too, learn a new piece by breaking it down into parts. As they practice, they inevitably mess up their fingering. Painters make sketches before they create their actual painting. They crumple up a lot of paper in the process. Even improvisational actors practice together in the service of an improving performance. Freewriting is a writer's way of practicing, generating. Freewriting cultivates the creativity that helps one get to the heart of a soulful performance. Freewriting is one of the means by which a writer produces his or her best work.