

Advancing the Retreat: Continuing Your Momentum After *WriteOut!* Is Over

SET YOURSELF FREE! FROM FREE WRITING TO FIRST DRAFT

What is Free Writing?

Free writing is continuous, uncensored, uncorrected writing of anything that comes into your head about your topic for a short period of time (e.g., 5-30 minutes).

What's the purpose of Free Writing?

Free writing has many aims, but one of the most important is to release writers from the desire or expectation that their thoughts be polished before being put on the page. This strategy generates a lot of material that contains a small number of useful “nuggets” which the writer expands upon and refines after the initial free writing session. Because revision is assumed, there's no need to write perfectly at first.

When should I Free Write?

Anytime! But free writing is particularly useful when writers feel “stuck,” either because they think they cannot generate ideas, or because they are resisting writing down what they do know.

What do I do after I've done some Free Writing?

Robert Boice describes a process for moving from free writing to outline to first draft. The steps I've outlined below are based on his ideas. Qualitative researchers will note the similarity between this strategy and qualitative data analysis techniques.

1. **Free write** continuously for 5-10 minutes (longer if you feel comfortable): don't stop for anything or struggle over wording, clarity, or punctuation. And don't cross anything out or edit it. If you can't think of something, just write down “I can't think of anything” until something comes into your head.
2. Review your writing and **underline the points** you think are important, interesting, or have some potential. Do not stop to think about the relationship between these points. Just underline the ones that you are most interested in pursuing.
3. **Label the points, then Cluster** together those that seem similar to one another. Do this quickly, without stopping to explore in detail whether the label is the perfect one or what the similarities are between points with the same label. If the points cannot be clustered together, do not worry—just label the points and move to the next step.
4. **Organize the clusters or points** into a logical arrangement. In this step, you want to move a little more slowly, taking your time to think through the possible relationships between the clusters. Depending on how you work, you may want to rearrange the physical pages on your desk, outline the clusters in a new document, or diagram them using shapes or charts. Use whatever strategy makes most sense to you.

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5. Once you have an organized arrangement of your points, **write a brief paragraph about what each of the points means**, what you aim to say. In this step, take the time to ensure that you're saying what you mean to, even if you say it awkwardly. If you need additional resources in order to complete a paragraph, note what is missing in brackets and continue writing. At the end of this step you will have two documents: 1) several pages of free writing and 2) an annotated outline/diagram that elaborates every topic you found relevant in your original free writing session.
6. Starting at the beginning and drawing freely from what you have already written, **write down in narrative form the ideas that are in your outline/diagram**. Work slowly, on short, manageable sections. Take the time to clarify confusions and be as precise as possible with your language. If you need to refer to outside sources, do so, but do not become distracted by reading. At the end of this process, you will have a first draft that expresses your thinking at the moment. Although it may be awkwardly composed, incomplete, and poorly organized, it will nevertheless be a workable first draft that you can refine and share with others.

Where can I find out more about free writing?

Check out Robert Boice's *Professors as Writers*, especially chapters 4 and 5. Other good sources on free writing are Natalie Goldberg's *Writing Down the Bones*, Anne Lamott's *Bird by Bird*, and Peter Elbow's *Writing Without Teachers*.