Freewriting: making your teaching more writing intensive and making writing about learning and thinking

What is freewriting?

Freewriting is a tool or strategy that can be used by anyone – lecturers, tutors or students – and for a range of purposes. Essentially, the purpose of freewriting is to unlock creativity and ideas in a low-stakes, not-for-marks writing task that is specifically timed and framed. For example, if you are trying to write a paper for publication and you have done some reading and have lots of ideas but are not sure where to start with the writing, set yourself a freewriting task. Choose an aspect of your paper’s topic that you would like to make some notes on, and write for five minutes. The only real rule is that your pen should not stop writing for the whole of the five minutes. Don’t concern yourself with writing in ‘perfect’ grammar or even in full sentences. Write the ideas down in whatever form they emerge and don’t stop yourself until time is up. Then read what you have written and begin to work out for yourself which ideas are worth keeping and which are not, and you can expand and develop your paper from there.

Freewriting is low-stakes, which means it should only be used as an exercise for learning and thinking, rather than a task for marks. Attaching marks to freewrites tends to defeat their purpose of being exploratory and concerned with the free flow of ideas and thoughts rather than perfectly grammatical sentences and paragraphs.

Key to a successful freewriting session are the following ingredients:

- A set amount of time – 3 or 5 or 7 minutes, but longer tends to be too long
- A clean piece of paper and a pen or pencil
- A clearly defined topic or idea around which to write
- A bit of peace and quiet and some focus

How can it be used in teaching and learning?

Freewriting can be a valuable tool to use with students, as it can be used to encourage them to write frequently in lectures and tutorials, and outside of them; to promote the use of writing as a method of discovering what they know and think, and where their gaps are; to make writing in an academic setting less pressured, and more relaxed and even enjoyable, which will hopefully lead to less stress around their more high-stakes writing assignments.

Freewriting can be used in relation to revision and recall of lectures; to promote and activate critical thinking and questioning; and to work through essay writing and assignment writing tasks.
Here are some ideas of how to use freewriting in your lectures or tutorials:

**Idea 1: freewriting to promote revision and basic recall of lecture topics**

At the end of a lecture, or after a certain topic has been lectured and discussed, ask your students to get out their pens or pencils and a piece of paper and pose a question on the board related to the topic, like ‘what did you understand about X?’ or ‘what are the three main points we have just discussed in relation to topic X?’. Ask them to write for 3 or 5 minutes, explaining that this task is about them writing down what they think and remember in whatever order it comes out and without worrying about sentences or grammar. Time them and stop them when time is up. Ask them to share their ideas with a neighbour for a few minutes and then ask the class for feedback. This task promotes your students’ own writing, prompts not only memory and revision of the lecture topic, but also thinking about their response to it, and promotes peer support and interaction. It also gives you feedback on where there may be gaps you could address in further classes.

**Idea 2: freewriting to promote critical thinking and reflection**

Set your students a freewrite task in class, at the end of a lecture topic, or at a similar point when they will be able to think more reflectively or critically about what they have been learning. The topic should ask them to think or reflect in some way. For example, they could be asked to write down at least three questions they have thought of while they have been learning the topic or that occur to them thinking about the topic – you could model a couple as examples on the board before they start. Or, you could ask them to write for five minutes on whether they agree or disagree with an aspect of the topic if the content lends itself to that sort of question, and ask them to say why or why not using what they have learnt in class. Ask them to write for 5 minutes, time them and stop them when time is up. You can either take in their writing and read a selection – not for marks but for information – and students can be asked to write anonymously so that their writing cannot be judged. This will give you useful information on how much they understand and what they think about what they have been learning. You can alternatively ask them to share their thoughts with peers and give collective feedback in class.

**Idea 3: freewriting as essay preparation (1)**

If you have set an essay or assignment that students have to write, you can use freewriting at various points to help your students think about and write about aspects of the topic. Freewriting here can be so useful in terms of helping them to analyse and explore the topic and find ideas for research and reading.

For example: go through the essay topic in class, and discuss the topic with them, breaking it down and explaining your expectations of their assignments. Then set them a five minute freewrite on one aspect of the task. Ask them to write anything and everything they can think of related to that mini-topic in whatever order it comes out. Then get them to pair off or work in small groups, sharing their ideas for a few minutes and then ask for collective feedback. This could further stimulate discussion on the essay topic, and also help them to see where they can find their keywords for their reading and research.
There are many ways in which freewriting can be used in large and small lecture halls, as well as in tutorials. The most important things to remember when using freewriting is that the exercises need to be timed and focused, students must use all of the time for writing and must be encouraged to do so as freely as possible, and the exercises must be low-stakes and aimed at learning, thinking and development, and not at assessment.

Useful references


