The Importance of Informal Writing in the Classroom: A Guide to Formal Writing

By Meghan Whitlock

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Abstract

With the increasing emphasis on structured, academic essays in the English classroom, informal writing has slowly been removed. This project will focus on the importance of informal writing and how activities such as freewriting, focused freewriting, and reader response writing can be implemented as a means to engage students in the writing process. The thesis also discusses the ways in which these informal writing activities can later emerge into formal, structured essays.
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Marissa sighs as her essay is handed back to her with red ink written in the margins. “Another C,” she says to her friend and rolls her eyes.

She crinkles up the essay and sinks low into her chair. She shakes her head in disappointment. “I don’t know what it is. I just can’t write these formal essays. I’ve been working on this paper for over a week and I still got a C.”

Marissa’s confidence in writing is once again damaged. She often finds herself struggling while trying to organize her thoughts for a formal essay. Although Marissa is an honor student and is expected to be able to think and write critically, she always struggles with English class. The long nights spent sitting in front of the computer trying to develop an articulate, organized essay, seem useless as she still receives low grades on her formal papers.

Sensing her hostile mood, Mrs. Carlin approaches Marissa’s desk.

“Is there a problem you would like to discuss Marissa?”

Marissa unwrinkles her essay and smoothes out the edges. On the verge of tears, she looks up at Mrs. Carlin.

“I can’t seem to score any higher than a C on my essays. What am I doing wrong?”
Mrs. Carlin picks up the crinkled papers and points to a quotation. “Well, right here, you chose a quotation that supports your thesis but you do not thoroughly analyze it. You need to take the explanation to the next level. Think about how this quotation supports your argument. You must move beyond the text and think critically.”

It isn’t the first time Marissa has heard this expression and she silently thinks to herself, *move beyond the text, what does that even mean?*

“Class, when we are analyzing literature we must think critically. Think about the deeper meaning of the novel. What do you think the author is really trying to tell us about life, about human nature?”

Marissa, tired of the secret authorial meanings embedded in the text, gives up all hope for writing analytical essays on literature. Discouraged and disengaged, she zones out for the rest of class as Mrs. Carlin rambles on about critical thinking and authorial intent.

For Mrs. Carlin and for other public school teachers, formal essay writing is the main goal. As teachers, we want to fully prepare our students for the outside world, whether it is a trade or a college career. Students need to know how to write effectively when applying for jobs and especially when pursuing a future in academics. Mari Lerz, a teacher of twelve years and the chair of the English
department at Bethel High School, states that formal writing is highly emphasized in the public school systems. She claims that formal writing is “a good life practice on how to organize one’s thinking.” Lerz also claims that as well as organizing ideas, formal writing is beneficial for proving an argument in a logical, coherent way.

Although public schools base the majority of their writing on formal writing assessments, some students, like Marissa, need to start with the basics of writing and gradually move forward to succeed in formal essay writing. In order for these students to attain the ultimate goal of writing structured essays, they must begin with the opposite of formal writing—informal writing.

Formal writing demonstrates a clear use of the English language along with a series of organized, coherent thoughts. The most common type of formal writing is the five paragraph essay, which includes an introduction, a focused thesis statement, three supporting paragraphs, and a conclusion. The five paragraph essay is a very structured, organized way of writing and in English classes the essay usually focuses on analyzing a piece of literature. Another frequently used type of formal writing includes research-based writing. In most high schools, research papers are required in English and History classes. These papers are written for informative purposes and are organized similar to the structure of the five paragraph essay. Both the five paragraph essay and the
research paper obtain specific, organized structure requiring smooth transitions between topics and a logical flow from one idea to the next. These formal types of writing prohibit the use of the words I, me, my, you, and yours, and must be written from the third person, giving the writing an objective, scholarly point of view.

Informal writing, however, is the exact opposite. Informal writing is the writing that is messy and unorganized with run-on sentences and improper punctuation. Random, sporadic thoughts and phrases scribbled onto paper often constitute as a piece of informal writing. Informal writing is sometimes incoherent, yet its coherence emerges at the end of the process as student’s writing gradually improves. It is through informal writing that students come to discover themselves and the surrounding world. By implementing informal writing activities in the classroom such as freewriting, focused freewriting, and reader-response writing, students will emerge as critical thinkers who are capable of producing formal academic essays. Let’s look at the various types of informal writing and how they work as part of an evolving writing process.

What is Freewriting?

Freewriting is the act of writing without stopping for a set amount of time. In most English classes, teachers who implement freewriting allow their students five to ten minutes of non-stop writing. It is the easiest way to prevent “writer’s
Freewriting is the initial step for beginning or struggling writers who can not organize their ideas into a structured essay. For the students who hate writing and have lost confidence in their writing as a result of low grades on academic essays; freewriting is a way to encourage these unmotivated students to write. Freewriting also gives them the freedom to write about anything they wish.

When I introduced freewriting exercises to my English classes during my student-teaching experience, the students had various reactions to the guidelines I presented. The rules of freewriting that I discussed with my students reflect the ideas of Natalie Goldberg in *Writing Down the Bones*. (8)

“Just think of freewriting as word vomit,” I tell the class on the first day as I hand out black and white freewriting journals. “I want you to ‘throw up’ onto the paper. Any phrases, words, ideas, or thoughts that come into your mind at the moment you are writing should be written down on the paper.”

The class has never been introduced to freewriting, and they stare at me with bewildered looks as I continue with the directions.

“You need to keep your pen moving the entire time. I am giving you five minutes and you are not allowed to stop writing. For the whole five minutes, I
want to see that pen moving. And you are forbidden to go back and cross anything out. Just write. Even if you write something by accident, leave it alone.”

Still, the class stares at me as though I have twelve eyes.

“Don’t worry about grammar, punctuation, and spelling. You aren’t being graded on this activity.”

Then the heads start to perk up and I hear whispers circulating through the room. One student, who is particularly surprised by these rules, says “You mean we won’t get points taken off for spelling? We can have sentence fragments? We can have run-on sentences?”

“Yes,” I tell him. “I just want you to write anything that comes to your mind. Even if you write the word ‘poop’ over and over again, just keep writing that word until other words or thoughts come onto the paper.”

The class giggles. I can see that some of them are now suddenly interested in the topic.

“And last, don’t be afraid of your writing. If you write something scary or something controversial, dive into it. This writing probably has the most creative energy.”
Students reach into their backpacks and grab their pens. They seem excited and intrigued about freewriting.

One student raises her hand. “Who’s gonna read these?” She asks nervously.

“I’ll be the only one reading these,” I assure her. “No other students will be allowed to see your freewrites. If you feel like your writing is too private to share with me, then fold the page over and I promise I won’t read it.”

**Freewriting: Private vs. Public and the Safe Environment**

As a teacher, tell your students that their freewritings are for them. Freewritings are a memoir of personal feelings, ideas, and beliefs that will be safe from the public eye. Only you, the teacher, will read the students’ freewritings and comment on them. Be sure students know you will not be grading these activities, and misspelled words and improper grammar are okay when freewriting. Although as English teachers it is tempting to correct spelling and grammar errors, DO NOT edit the student’s work. Only make comments on the writing like “That’s interesting” or “I felt that way before too.” Freewriting is one of the only times a student can write without worrying about perfecting mechanical errors like spelling and grammar. If a student receives a freewrite with
red ink and multiple corrections on the paper, he will immediately become discouraged and will no longer desire to write.

You must also ensure your students that if they write something too personal and wish to keep it confidential, they will have that privilege. Tell students to fold over any pages that are to remain private. You must keep your word to the students, and promise them that any folded pages will not be read. Although it will be tempting to read, just don’t do it! If you truly want to gain the trust of your students, you will respect their wishes and their privacy.

Allowing students to choose to share their freewritings establishes a sense of trust between the students and the teacher. Even if students are uneasy about sharing their personal feelings with the teacher, encourage them to do so and tell them there is no such thing as a wrong answer when discussing feelings, emotions, and ideas.

Teachers should also encourage students to share their freewrites with the class. Although students may feel uncomfortable reading a freewrite aloud, you should encourage the sharing of freewriting so the writer can receive quality feedback. Other students can comment on what they like and dislike about the piece, and can also make suggestions for improvement if the student decides to devise a formal draft of the freewrite. For students who are new to freewriting, it may take them awhile to open up to the class; therefore, you should engage in the
freewriting activities with your class and share your own freewrites with the students.

In my alternative English class, after a week of practicing freewriting, I asked my students to share their freewritings with me. Most of the students stared at me with blank, confused faces.

“I thought we didn’t have to share!” one student exclaimed.

I told the student that if his freewrite was too personal, he didn’t have to share, but I was very interested in hearing his writing.

With no volunteers and a few angry glances shot in my direction, I began to read my own freewrite aloud. I wrote about my brother, who is in prison, and how I wished for him to be back at home and out of trouble. I also wrote about the pain and depression I witnessed my mother going through, and how it saddened me to see her so distressed.

After reading the freewrite about my brother, the room was silent. My students were shocked that I let them into my personal life. After a few seconds of silence a student raised her hand. “I’ll read,” she said. She read her freewrite aloud and gradually, more and more students began volunteering to read their freewrites to the class.
My students began to read their freewrites aloud because I gained their trust and they felt safe in the classroom. Not only was a feeling of safety established, but I exposed students to my writing in its initial form. My students probably thought my freewrite was going to sound like a masterpiece, and it probably shocked them when they heard the way I was writing.

Freewriting is, in a sense, a first draft. When asked to complete freewrites students are essentially putting their first reactions and thoughts onto a piece of paper. Although the first reactions and thoughts may be messy, unclear, and somewhat unorganized, these reactions may later lead to a thesis for a formal paper.

Ernest Hemingway once said “the first draft of anything is shit.” Although I would not say those exact words to a student, it is important for students to realize that the first draft of a piece of writing is merely an idea for what may later emerge into a thesis for a formal paper. Informal writing is a way for students to put their ideas onto paper, and later organize those ideas and work them into an academic essay. By implementing informal writing methods, teachers will have the best of both worlds, informal and formal.

**Freewriting: A Necessity for Teens**
Adrian comes into class wiping tears from her blue, mascara-stained eyes. She was in a terrible fight with her boyfriend right before class. Her mind remains elsewhere; she is thinking about the fight and how it escalated into a screaming match in the middle of the hall. Not only is she embarrassed because her classmates witnessed the fight, but she is also embarrassed because her eyes are red and puffy and her cheeks are still soaked with black tears.

Rather than consoling Adrian, Mrs. Caldwell asks all students to take out their freewriting notebooks.

“Write anything you wish,” she tells the class. “Just keep your pens moving for ten minutes. Do not go back and re-read what you’ve written or cross things out. Let your pen guide you.”

Adrian grabs her freewriting notebook and begins writing. Her pen moves quickly across the page and her emotions pour out. In her freewriting, she expresses her sadness and frustration about the fight between her and her boyfriend.

Mrs. Caldwell can see the anger and sadness ease in Adrian’s face as her pen continues moving effortlessly across the paper. When the ten minutes of freewriting are over, Adrian looks relieved. Her tears are gone and her eyes are now attentive and focused.
As teenagers, our students enter the classroom with a multitude of problems. Some students live in poverty and searching for something to eat for breakfast may be the main concern in a student’s life. Other students come to school with the complications of their family lives, like the absence of a mother or father, while some deal with drug and alcohol addictions at home. Even if there are not issues at home, adolescents are changing physically and emotionally and something as simple as a small fight between a boyfriend and girlfriend can cause students to become easily distracted in class.

According to Paul Connelly, a member of the Bard Institute for Writing and Thinking, freewriting is used “to become centered, present for the learning that is about to begin, grounding out the static we bring to class.” Connelly’s statement reflects that students, especially high school students, come to class with the difficult pressures of adolescent life. Peer pressures and the need to fit in, family issues, and the struggles of academic success often plague our students and may distract students from their coursework. Some students simply need to freewrite in order to get their thoughts down on paper and clear their minds. Once students get these thoughts down on paper, they will be much more attentive in class because they will not be distracted by outside circumstances. Peter Elbow agrees that “Freewriting is a useful outlet. We have lots in our heads that makes it hard to think straight and write clearly: we are mad at someone, sad about something, depressed about everything.” (Elbow 15) Elbow’s statement further
portrays the point that freewriting is a necessity for teens who are experiencing a variety of emotions during adolescence.

Freewriting holds high importance in the English classroom, yet most traditional classroom teachers neglect this activity because they are too busy trying to fulfill the rigorous English curriculum. Teaching the required novels, along with vocabulary, grammar, and standardized test preparation leaves freewriting as a nonexistent activity in the classroom. However, it is time that we give freewriting a place in the curriculum. If teachers spent more time focusing on freewriting activities, students would become more articulate, organized writers and more avid thinkers.

Unfortunately, freewriting has slowly been pushed out of the English curriculum, and the major focus in the present day classroom revolves around academic, literary analysis essays. The problem with literary analysis essays is that not all students have the talent of composing an organized paper which reflects critical thinking. Many students have problems organizing their ideas and they often have trouble beginning the assignment. According to Carol-Sweedler Brown, if students are asked to produce a thesis statement and an outline for a paper, student writing will suffer and will lack creativity and depth. Brown states “when students are forced to generate a thesis and an outline as one of the first steps of the writing process the essays they produce are apt to be logically
outrageous or mechanical and superficial.” (92) Brown’s statement reflects that students should not be forced into thinking and organizing, rather, they should freewrite to determine their own ideas and opinions regarding a particular subject.

Charles Darwin also comments that “Formerly I used to think of my sentences before writing them down; but for several years I have found that it saves time to scribble in a vile hand whole pages as quickly as I possibly can, contracting half the words; and then correct. Sentences thus scribbled down are often better ones than I could have written deliberately.” (Darwin, The Autobiography) Darwin’s statement reflects that freewriting before writing an actual formal essay is a beneficial process used to formulate ideas. Rather than contemplating a sentence before writing it, which many students do, it is better to freewrite and discover new thoughts before beginning the formal essay. Sometimes, as Darwin stated, the first sentences are better than sentences that are contrived after thinking for a long period of time. These spontaneous sentences can later be confined into elements of a formal essay.

**The Benefits of Freewriting**

Freewriting is used to enforce writing and to practice the art of writing on a daily basis. After all, writing is a learned skill; the more one practices writing, the better one becomes at perfecting the art. Elizabeth Cohen, associate professor in the Department of Writing, Linguistics, and Creative Process at Western
Connecticut State University, agrees that “the more often you write the better writer you become.” Cohen also states that “by freewriting over the course of a semester you become a more fluent and comfortable writer.” Cohen’s statements reflect that with practice and consistency, all students are capable of becoming writers through the act of freewriting.

Freewriting is also a great way to encourage unmotivated students to become engaged in the writing process. For the students who do not like writing and struggle with organizing their ideas, freewriting is the first step toward successful formal writing.

In my alternative English class, the students are unmotivated and lazy; they will do anything to con their way out of writing a paper, especially a formal paper. When these students know they are writing a formal essay, they skip class because they do not want to endure the struggles of writing. Every student in the alternative English classroom battles with formal writing; the students have trouble formulating ideas and organizing them into coherent thoughts that fit logically into a structured paper. However, once I implemented freewriting in the classroom, student’s perspectives on writing changed. The students enjoyed coming to class and they even enjoyed writing because they had the freedom to write about anything they wished. Tiffany J. Hunt, author of Teaching is Revision says “when I implemented ten minutes of freewriting daily in my seventh grade
classes, I found that students’ writing and their attitude toward writing improved significantly during the course of the year.” (102) Through the use of freewriting students not only began to enjoy writing, but their attitudes toward the subject improved. By freewriting, students gain the strategies and the confidence that is necessary to become articulate, organized writers.

Through freewriting, students are writing for five to ten minutes a day for the entire school year. Over the course of time, students will gradually develop a stronger control and usage of the English language. Mark Reynolds, author of Freewriting’s Origin, states that this daily, scheduled writing “will lead to greater control, to more knowledge about the self, and to greater ease in the simple activity of writing.” (82) Therefore, once students become comfortable with writing and practice the art on a daily basis, they will naturally develop into more fluent writers by exploring and experimenting with the language regularly.

Students also have the opportunity to express themselves in various ways through freewriting; they are granted the opportunities to experiment with language, vocabulary, and sentence structure. Mari Lerz, chair of the English department at Bethel High states that informal writing can lead to productive formal writing as students develop more interesting sentence variations. Lerz claims that “the more creative writing they [students] do, the more interesting their formal writing will be.” Lerz’s comment holds truth: if students are creative
and imaginative while doing informal writing, they will be more creative with their formal responses as well. However, students must first begin their creativity with informal writing, which neglects all the standard rules of formal writing and gives students freedom of expression. Once students have developed their own unique voice and have had experience playing with language, they can later put their creativity to good use in their formal writing.

**Freewriting as the basis for formal essays**

After students gain a sense of control of the English language and experiment with word and sentence variation, the organization process begins. In order to organize ideas in freewriting and turn these ideas into the basis of a formal essay, teachers should ask their students to do the following, as Mark Reynolds also suggests in *Make Freewriting More Productive.* (81-2)

First, ask students to go back into their freewriting journals and pick a freewrite to re-read. After re-reading the freewrite, ask students to summarize the main point or argument they were trying to make in the freewrite. This main point or argument will be the thesis statement of the paper.

Next, have students pick out ideas from the freewrite that could support that thesis or main argument. If students are having trouble looking for supporting ideas, instruct them to ask themselves *who, what, when, where, why,* and *how* to
generate other ideas. Last, have students examine the word choices they’ve made. See if students like their word choices and phrases, and ask them to elaborate on any of those words or phrases.

These elements can be used to make the freewriting process more meaningful in the classroom and will lead to the construction of formal essays. When students are asked to pick out key ideas and concepts within their own writing they are discovering their own writing process and how the stages of prewriting can lead to academic-style essays. Reynolds also states that:

Free writing can provide students with an initial text on a focused topic, or it can help them discover a variety of ideas for possible topics. Activities such as these can help students bring some order to the jumble of ideas in a free writing or use it more productively, making it much more valuable as a prewriting exercise. (82)

Reynolds suggests that establishing some type of order in freewriting will make the process more meaningful for students and teachers, and freewrites will gradually become organized, well-developed ideas that can be found in formal academic essays.

Mark Reynolds quotes Dorothea Brande in his article Freewriting’s Origin, in which Brande states that “These spontaneous manuscripts are usually very interesting, and often, with some shaping, can be turned into satisfactory finished work. They are a little rambling, a little discursive, but they have a fresh unforced tone which is striking.” (82) Brande’s statement on freewriting reflects
that by editing and shaping freewrites, they can later turn into satisfactory work fit for formal, academic essays. Brande also claims that freewrites have “a fresh unforced tone” which can also later be added into a piece of formal writing, making the formal writing sound interesting and unique.

Peter Elbow, in *Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process* also agrees that “freewriting improves your writing. It doesn’t always produce powerful writing itself, but it leads to powerful writing.” Here, Elbow is saying that freewriting may not create a powerful piece of writing itself, but it will eventually form into a powerful piece of writing.

However, it is important to note that the immediate results of freewriting will not directly turn into a well-developed, formal essay. Students need continuous practice freewriting, and only after an extended length of practice will students be able to manipulate their ideas into components of a formal paper. Teachers must remember to focus on the long-term goals of freewriting, and how these long-term goals will benefit the future of student writing.

**Free writing and the importance of no goals**

Freewriting should be a writing system with no short-term goals. Students will not be judged or graded on their writing skills when freewriting. The goals involved with free writing tend to be long-term goals, which will only be fulfilled
after continuous practice. The two long term goals associated with freewriting are process and product goals. Process goals refer to the process of writing itself and focus on improvements in how students begin the writing process. After asking students questions about free writing and the writing process in order to determine the process-goals, several students stated that free writing helped them sort out their thoughts and feelings, while others said that free writing allowed them to let words come out across the page in an effortless fashion, in a way that academic essays did not allow. Other students claimed that they were less pressured when free writing because they were not writing for a specific audience. Instead, these students were writing for themselves and their own personal reasons, making the writing process a more meaningful experience. As time passed, students grew more and more confident with their writing skills. Writing no longer became a task for these students, but a fun activity and a way for students to express themselves.

As well as process goals, product goals are equally important in freewriting. Product goals focus on the improvement in specific categories of one’s writing. For example, after frequent practice, students will see advancements in their syntax, vocabulary, and voice. In the classroom, students will be asked a series of questions in order to take a closer look at their writing skills. The following questions, according to Peter Elbow, a member of the Bard
Institute for Thinking and Writing, should be asked to students in order to determine the product goals.

1.) **Syntax.** What passages or pieces show more flexibility and variety in syntax- as opposed to stiff repetitive rhythms and patterns?

2.) **Vocabulary.** What passages or pieces show more flexibility and variety in words and expression?

3.) **Voice.** Where do we notice a strong voice?

Elbow states that asking these questions to students will “allow them to look more carefully at their own writing—and the writing of peers and published writing.” Not only will students gain insights into their own writing process and style, but they will be able to analyze the writing styles of peers and other various authors.

While student-teaching, I conducted an anonymous survey, asking students Elbow’s questions regarding syntax, vocabulary, and voice. Students were instructed to answer the questions to the best of their ability based on their experiences doing freewriting in the classroom.

After asking questions about syntax to my own high school students, they responded with the following answers:

- “My syntax is definitely better when I do freewriting or focused freewriting. I don’t feel pressured and the words just seem to fill
the page. I feel like my phrases and sentences just fit together naturally.”

- “My writing has improved through freewriting. I like it when I am able to write anything I want. My sentences don’t sound so planned out and repetitive.”

When asked “Where do you see improvements in your vocabulary? What passages show variety and flexibility in words and expression?” students answered:

- “My vocabulary used to suck. After freewriting for ten minutes on a daily basis, my vocabulary gradually improved. Looking back through my freewriting journal from the beginning of the semester, I realize that I used to write like a third grader. Now, I have a variety of words to use to express myself.”

- “My vocabulary has always been good, but through daily freewriting it only improved. Looking at my formal essays and comparing them to my informal writings, I think my informal writings show more growth and development in word variety.”

Lastly, I asked students “Where do you see a strong voice in your writing?” and students responded with the following statements:

- “I see a stronger voice in my academic writing. Now that I’ve had practice doing freewriting it seems like all of my other writings have developed a stronger voice.”

- “I see a stronger voice in my academic writing assignments and in my informal writing assignments. After freewriting for so long I think my voice will be strong in any kind of writing I’m asked to do.”

Through these questions, students begin to analyze their own work and the works of other various authors. Students will see how their writing has changed
over the course of time and will notice that with practice, their writing gradually develops. After students see a positive development in their writing, they will gain the confidence needed to continue writing and to continue to make improvements.

In the present-day public school systems the importance of “no-goals,” as Elbow describes it, is an absurd notion. Academic-style essays are always promoted first and foremost above any other type of writing. Teachers are worried about educating their students for future careers and freewriting seems like a pointless process, especially for students who are considered “good writers.” But even students who are “good writers” when it comes to formal essays need practice freewriting in order to expand their syntactic skills and develop a unique voice.

Through freewriting, syntax, and voice will be unconsciously developed through writing on a daily basis. When freewriting, one may break the rules of grammar and create a sentence like “Me and him we was walking down the road and we saw a frog which reminds me of the other day when I was watching a television program about animals that live in swamps.” Although the sentence is ungrammatical, it is readable and the ideas in the sentence are present. In Writing with Power: Techniques for Mastering the Writing Process, Elbow gives a similar example to the sentence above and explains that:
When you write quickly, however, as in freewriting, your syntactic units hang together. Even if you change your mind in mid-sentence…you produce a clear break. You don’t try to plaster over two or three syntactic units as one, as you so often do in painstaking writing. Freewriting produces syntactic coherence and verbal energy which gradually transfer to your more careful writing. (16-17)

Elbow’s statement reflects that syntax, the logical and proper forming of sentences, will naturally occur when freewriting. Elbow also notes that when freewriting the writer does not try to make three syntactic units fit as one, but simply keeps writing allowing “syntactic coherence” to emerge.

A strong voice is also developed through freewriting. Elbow claims that freewriting “helps you stand out of the way and let words be chosen by the sequence of the words themselves or the thought, not by the conscious self. In this way freewriting gradually puts a deeper resonance or voice into your writing.” (Writing with Power 16) Elbow’s statement reflects that when one is freewriting, the writer is not thinking or planning out the words that will come onto the page; the writer is simply writing without necessarily thinking of what to say. Because the writer’s sentences are not forced or mechanically contrived, a resonating voice remains in the writing.

Idea for Implementing Freewriting in the Classroom:

Not only is freewriting used to experiment with grammar, vocabulary, and voice, but it can also be implemented in the classroom to imitate the different writing styles of various authors.
While student-teaching, I gave my academic English class an assignment imitating J.D. Salinger’s voice in *Catcher in the Rye*. As a class, we discussed Salinger’s stream of consciousness writing style, and the way the main character, Holden, seems to be constantly digressing about random things. However, we also discussed the fact that Holden’s “ramblings” provide insight and depth into his character.

For homework students were required to write a two page stream of consciousness paper imitating Salinger’s style. Students were allowed to write about any topic they wished. When students turned their papers in, I read some of the papers aloud while the class listened. Class members were required to guess which student wrote the paper based on the insights portrayed about the author.

The class enjoyed hearing other student’s freewrites and they had a great time trying to guess who wrote each paper. Many of the students even took on some of the sayings that Holden uses in *Catcher in the Rye*. Ironically, the students who normally scored low on formal academic essays scored very high on their stream of consciousness essays. Students scored higher on these essays because they were not focusing on the organizational components of the essay. In structured essays, organization and the logical transitioning from one idea to the next is a large part of formal writing. Most students struggle with good organization skills and therefore focus more on organizing than the actual writing.
Also, when it comes to formal writing teachers give students preordained outlines, in which they are forced to write about the subject before they have explored their own ideas regarding the topic. However, in the stream of consciousness papers, students were completely focused on the writing, which made the work interesting, creative, and enjoyable to read.

The stream of consciousness activity was beneficial for students because they learned about a new writing style and practiced imitating the writing style, which was essentially freewriting. Freewriting activities like this can also be implemented with similar activities focusing on style and voice.

For example, Sandra Cisneros has a poetic voice in *House on Mango Street*. Asking students to imitate this poetic, short-sentence style is another way to encourage freewriting in the classroom. These freewriting activities are meaningful and relevant to the materials being covered in class, and could later constitute as the basis of a formal essay. By imitating the writing of Cisneros, students grasp a larger understanding of different types of writing, which will add creativity and depth to their future academic papers.

Another informal writing style that is useful in the classroom is focused freewriting. Freewriting gives the author the flexibility to jump from thought to thought while writing, whereas focused freewriting is narrowed down to a single topic.
What is focused freewriting?

Focused freewriting is, in some ways, similar to freewriting. Focused freewriting is a freewrite based on a topical prompt. The prompt can focus on a section of a story, a picture, a clip from a movie, or may even constitute finishing a sentence. Focused freewriting is a timed activity where students are allowed five to ten minutes to respond to a specific prompt. Differing from the random, unconnected, sporadic thoughts of freewriting, focused freewriting requires that students write about one specific subject or topic.

Focused freewriting is the second step leading toward successful formal writing. Similar to a formal essay, focused freewriting asks students to respond to one specific issue. Instead of asking students to fill out an outline about the topic, which is usually required for formal essays, focused freewriting allows students to write down all the thoughts and ideas they have regarding a specific concept before composing a formal essay.

Rather than teaching students to generate their ideas before actually writing, which often occurs when teachers ask students to write academic essays, students should instead discover their ideas through writing. Brown states, “I believe that students must be taught to write in order to discover their ideas, not encouraged to present those ideas in order to fill a preordained outline form. They must let their writing generate their thesis and outline rather than the reverse.”
Brown’s statement holds truth: students should write to discover what they’ve learned and what they know about a particular topic; they cannot produce a formal paper without fully exploring the subject first. Focused freewriting allows students to explore their ideas through writing rather than forcing them to write before they actually begin the thinking process.

Focused freewriting is useful because it provides students with specific directions for writing, which can later evolve into a formal essay. In focused freewriting assignments, students are asked to write down everything they think or know about the assigned topic. Therefore, the knowledge and the ideas are already placed on paper through the focused freewriting exercise, and it is then the student’s job to find the ideas that could constitute for a formal essay. Similar to creating a formal essay through freewriting, students must engage in the same procedure to form an academic essay with focused freewriting.

First, teachers must instruct students to write one sentence that summarizes the main argument of their focused freewrite, which will constitute as the thesis of a formal paper. Next, students will be required to pick three major concepts out of their focused freewrite which support their main argument or thesis. Then, students must look at their focused freewrite again and try to develop subconcepts which would constitute as the proof under each major
concept. Here, students are beginning to organize the ideas written in their freewrites in order to compose a formal essay. (Reynolds 81-2)

**Ideas for Implementing Focused Freewriting in the Classroom**

Freewriting can be implemented in the classroom through a variety of ways. Showing a movie clip related to a class discussion and asking students to respond to the movie is one example of implementing a freewriting assignment. Another way to implement focused freewriting is through pictures. The teacher may put a picture of a spooky forest onto the overhead and ask students to write about the picture. Focused freewriting can also include a response to music. The teacher can play a song and ask students to listen to the lyrics of the song and respond to them in a focused freewrite. In secondary classrooms, focused freewriting is usually implemented through writing prompts. Examples of focused freewriting prompts include:

- It was a sad day indeed… (Students must finish the prompt)

- I was angry when… (Students must finish the prompt)

- Write about your favorite childhood memory.

- Write about your favorite book and explain why you love this book.

- Write about a time when you felt out of place.
- Write about your favorite meal.

- Write a dialogue between a mother and a teenager.

By providing these freewriting prompts, students are required to make their writing more specific and detailed because they are focusing on one particular subject. In some ways focused freewriting can be easier for students because the teacher provides more direction. While some students prefer to have the freedom to write about anything, other students need direction and focus when writing. Most importantly, focused freewriting means students are writing. In order to become good writers, consistent practice is the key.

Elizabeth Cohen, associate professor in the Department of Writing, Linguistics, and Creative Process at Western Connecticut State University, uses focused freewriting activities six to seven times within a semester course. Cohen states that she uses focused freewriting because “in any writing class, especially a creative writing class, the most important thing is to be writing all the time.” Cohen often uses topical prompts about music, current events, or pieces of poetry to spark creativity in student writing.

Cohen also claims that freewriting and focused freewriting are fun, engaging activities. Cohen’s main goal is to teach students that writing can be
enjoyable and creative; it doesn’t always have to be an organized, structured essay.

As well as being an imaginative, engaging activity, focused freewriting can also help students relate to an aspect being discussed in class. Throughout my experience as a student teacher I have found that focused freewriting is a favorite activity among students. A few months ago as I was teaching *The Crucible*, I gave a focused freewriting prompt to my students. During class we were discussing the term “scapegoat.” In order for students to internalize the meaning of the term and apply it to the text, I asked students to complete the following focused freewriting prompt:

-Write about a time when you used someone as your own personal scapegoat.

I gave students ten minutes to complete the prompt, and afterwards we shared our stories with one another. The students loved hearing other stories from their classmates and they enjoyed sharing their own stories as well, even though some students were uneasy about reading their personal experiences aloud.

A few weeks later, when students took *The Crucible* test, one of the essay questions asked students to define the term scapegoat and to relate the term to a particular scene in *The Crucible*. Eighty-five percent of the students who took the test received credit for the correct answer on that question. Because I asked
students to write about their own lives and circumstances in the focused freewrite, they were able to answer the question correctly and apply the meaning of the term to the actual text discussed in class.

I also practiced focused freewriting with my alternative English class. The class read the book *The Absolutely True Diary of a Part Time Indian* by Sherman Alexie. Students were assigned focused freewrites such as:

- write about a time when you were bullied by someone else
- write about a close friend who you consider your family
- write your own ending to the story

These focused freewriting prompts contributed to great class discussions about the book’s main character, Junior. After sharing stories about their own experiences with bullying, students began to discuss Junior’s encounters with bullies and the abuse he faces from his peers every day. Students felt connected to the text because they recalled their own experiences being bullied and therefore felt sympathy for the main character.

The students also enjoyed creating their own endings to the story. The alternate story ending had to be told through Junior’s point of view, and they were required to imitate his writing style and voice. Students did a great job creating
new endings and this focused freewrite allowed students to express their creativity with story-telling.

Teachers may be thinking: how can these activities lead to formal writing? First, these activities give students a chance to formulate their own ideas and thoughts regarding a text or subject discussed in class. Students are not reiterating the ideas the teacher already presented, they are devising their own reactions, allowing them to think critically and discover what they truly know about a certain topic. Once students are done freewriting they can re-read the freewrite and pick out important ideas within their writing, and then begin the elaboration process on those ideas.

As well as freewriting and focused freewriting, reader-response theory can lead to the composition of formal essays in a relatively painless, creative way for students. Reader-response theory allows students to develop personal connections with texts and also consists of analyzing and commenting on various aspects of literature such as quotations, characters, settings, and themes. However, the analysis of a text is not a rigorous, structured process, but a process that develops over time with the correct guidance and instruction.

**Reader-Response Theory**
Kayla Domizio walks into her American Literature class groaning and complaining about *The Great Gatsby*.

“Mrs. George I don’t understand why we have to read this crap.”

Mrs. George smiles at Kayla. “We read this crap, which is not crap at all, because it is a well-written work of art, because it is an accurate portrayal of life in the twenties, because—”

“Well it doesn’t apply to my life now. It’s so old, it’s so outdated. I don’t care about life in the twenties. I care about now.”

Mrs. George asks Kayla to take a seat in the classroom to begin the lesson for the day. By the end of the class period, Mrs. George will sway Kayla’s opinion about the text because she will use reader-response approaches when it comes to analyzing characters.

Mrs. George first asks the class “How did you like the first chapter?”

The students moan and groan from the back of the classroom. “This book is horrible!” one student claims.

Mrs. George writes the names of the different characters on the board: Nick, Gatsby, Tom, and Daisy. Next, students are asked to pick out five adjectives to describe each character. Students to go the board and list their adjectives,
explaining why they chose those adjectives for each character. Next, in order to relate the character’s to the students, Mrs. George asks each student to identify one of their characters with a person they know. “Based on the adjectives listed, I want you to write about one person you know who may resemble one of these characters. Write about how the adjectives can be applied to the person you know. How is the person you know similar to Gatsby, Daisy, Tom, or Nick?

Mrs. George’s activity asks students to write about the people they know, and therefore they make connections from their own life to the work of literature, making reading a more meaningful process for the student. Essentially, this is the main goal of reader-response theory. Teachers want to engage students in the text to make meaningful connections to literature. These connections to literature can later constitute as part of a literary analysis essay.

Reader-response theory is also based on student-centered strategies of teaching. When reading, students respond to texts by making unique connections with their own lives and prior experiences. (McAlpine 9) McAlpine states “to deprive students of the opportunity of making the work their own- that is, of bringing their own experience to bear upon it- is to fail to teach them to read.” (9) McAlpine’s statement reflects that each student is unique, and every student brings a different reaction or experience to the reading.

**Reader-Response Journals**
Reader-Response Journals are commonly used as a key component to Reader-Response Theory. Reader-response journals require students to react to passages, characters, settings, and quotations within a text. These journals are frequently checked by the teacher and are often used to stimulate student-led discussions.

Reader-Response Journals are necessary for all grade levels and will only enhance a student’s reading experience. McAlpine states that “the main point of assigning reading journals is to encourage students to find meaningful connections between their own knowledge and experience and that of the world of the literary work.” (13) McAlpine’s statement reflects that reading journals allow students to make meaningful connections between literature and reality. Without using these reading journals, students tend to read the text and see no purpose or meaning in the reading. If a student finds purpose in reading, and can make connections between their own life and the literature, reading becomes a more valuable process.

For example, if I was teaching The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn, I would ask students to comment on the character of Huck in their reader-response journals. I would ask students to describe Huck’s physical appearance, his personality, and ask for student’s initial reactions to his character when he is first introduced in the book. I would also ask students to refer to specific page numbers
in their reader-response journals, so they could later go back and view the pages where they described their initial thoughts about Huck. Here, I am asking students about their first thoughts regarding a character, which can later constitute as part of a formal essay.

**Reader Response as the basis of Formal Writing**

Reader Response is the last piece of the puzzle. It is the last step necessary to create a formal essay. Through reader-response, students are asked to jot down their thoughts and reactions to themes, characters, and passages within a text. From these reactions, a formal essay may emerge.

Through the act of reader-response, students are asked to read, and then write a reaction to the reading. Therefore, reading and writing are being treated as reciprocal arts. These reciprocal arts are necessary in order to synthesize the information one reads. Dr. Patrick Ryan, a professor of writing at Western Connecticut State University states:

> In *How to Read a Book*, Mortimer Adler considers reading and writing to be ‘reciprocal arts’. For one, we need to write in order to analyze and synthesize the complex ideas that we read. Also, by reading, we internalize the ‘grapholect’, that is, the styles of written discourse. Without writing, the reading process would be different, more fragmented and superficial because writing about what we read makes us return to the text, re-examine, and reconsider what we have read.

Ryan’s comment suggests that both reading and writing are necessary components to the process of synthesizing ideas, which is essentially what we do.
when we write formal essays. Ryan also states that writing forces one to re-examine a text, which is what we want students to do when reading their own writing, and the writing of others.

In reader-response theory students are subconsciously analyzing literature without experiencing the brutal questioning of the teacher: “What does this quotation mean? What is that character really trying to say? What is the author trying to tell us?” Rather than questioning our students, we are allowing students to make the critical connections on their own, and these connections can be used as supporting arguments within a formal essay.

In order to use the reader-response theory as a basis for constructing an essay, teachers should ask students to go back through their reader response journals. Students should examine some of the particular items that they made note of while reading. Are there notes about characterization? Setting? Mood? Tone? Thematic Elements? Students should first find a topic that they found themselves frequently writing about. From this topic, students will use their notes to devise a thesis statement. Once students devise their thesis statement, they will again scour their notes for concepts that could fit under this thesis. Next, students will find specific quotations and passages which will support the main concepts of their thesis. Because students directly analyze certain passages and certain
quotations within the text, reader-response theory is the closest link to analytical essays composed in the English classroom.

**To Sum it All Up**

Through the use of freewriting, focused freewriting, and reader-response writing, students emerge as critical thinkers capable of producing formal academic essays. Freewriting engages unmotivated students and encourages poor writers to gain a unique voice through writing. Freewriting also establishes creativity in sentence variation and structure which is necessary for formal writing. Along with freewriting, focused freewriting establishes the basics of a formal essay by specifying the writing to one topic. Both freewriting and focused freewriting can be used as the basis of formal essays by sorting through ideas and concepts written within these “first drafts” or freewrites. In addition to freewriting and focused freewriting, reader-response writing fulfills the last piece of the puzzle, where students begin to analyze literature on their own. Through reader-response writing, students read and react to the reading in words, which establishes the basis of a formal essay. By implementing informal writing methods in the classroom, our students will be more successful when it comes to writing formal essays.
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