



Freewriting Frenzy

Help your kids fall in love with writing



BY JULIE BOGART



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Design and Typsetting by Timothy Victor

Freedom.

Feels like:

Summertime,

kick-your-shoes-off,

let-your-hair-down,

shake your hips,

eat all the ice cream before breakfast,

pay the bills late,

travel the world on someone else's dime,

say the wrong thing,

skip your shower,

lie in the sun...

The feeling of Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh.

Language development is all about freedom—we take risks, try out words and phrases, test new vocabulary on a willing audience, and explore ideas in language to see how they sound or if we believe them.

Likewise, you have no trouble issuing a context of freedom to your early speakers. Your toddlers and youngsters delight you with their babbling sounds (*mama baba wanna*), their phonological errors (*mazazine, waterlemon, chacuzzi*), their poor grammar (*I wish Sarah camed with us*), and their misuse of new vocabulary (*She belied to me about that!*). Oodles of space is afforded to kids as they master their native languages and slaughter the structure and vocabulary on their way to fluency.

Not a single hand is wrung.

Not an eyebrow is raised.

In fact, misspoken words are proudly recorded in baby books for posterity.



Not so with writing.

Oh no! Every mistake is seen as evidence of low moral character (didn't care, is too lazy, won't try) and insufficient aptitude (not on grade level, not performing to skill level, possibly impaired). It's rare that someone realizes that on the way to competence, a lot of belly flops are required as kids get their linguistic balance and control while diving into the pool of written language.

Remember your 1st grade teacher, Mrs. Pickerington, with her pursed lips and red pen? Writing was serious business, requiring properly shaped letters, perfectly placed modifiers (whatever those are!), and painstakingly punctuated paragraphs.

By 3rd grade, the damage from the regimented world of required writing is a landscape of fallen wordsmiths who pretend disinterest or encounter a wall of writer's block. They desperately try to avoid the blood-letting of all that crimson ink. Some kids find their writing voices in spite of the ship-shape structure confining them. But too many become weary before they've even discovered they *have* writing voices.



The crazy thing about writing is this:

Writing requires messy, disconcerting freedom in order for writers to grow.

They need as much freedom to make mistakes in writing as they had in speaking. They need more years to make those mistakes because writing is harder than speech, and they need even more support, gentleness, and enthusiasm for their efforts.

That's right: spelling errors *should* be recorded in the baby book, because they are just as adorable as those misspoken words. Your kids will learn the mundane, conventional spellings of their educated peer group eventually (I promise!). But their invented spellings will only last a few years while they get their feet under them. Enjoy that stage of growth. Celebrate it!



How do we get there from here?

In this multi-page document, you will find a discussion of one of the primary tools we use in Brave Writer to help grow writers of all ages. *Freewriting* is the name of the writing method that allows kids to take those risks on paper. Freewriting is the methodology that leads to automaticity in writing—coordinating those left brain mechanical skills with the right brain language and insight generation. When we speak, we don't think about how to say the words or what word order to use or how to conjugate verbs. We focus on what we want to convey, giving all our attention to meaning.

In writing, kids find themselves distracted by how to form the cursive 'r' or how to spell *accompany*, or whether to use a colon or semi-colon. They can be distracted from their meaning by a cramped hand or the narrowness of the lines on the page. Freewriting is the method that allows kids to ignore the conventions of handwriting, punctuation, and spelling while they give their full attention to meaning generation. They get to write exactly what is in their heads (even, "I'm stuck, I'm stuck, I hate this! I wish I were sitting on the roof of my house!").

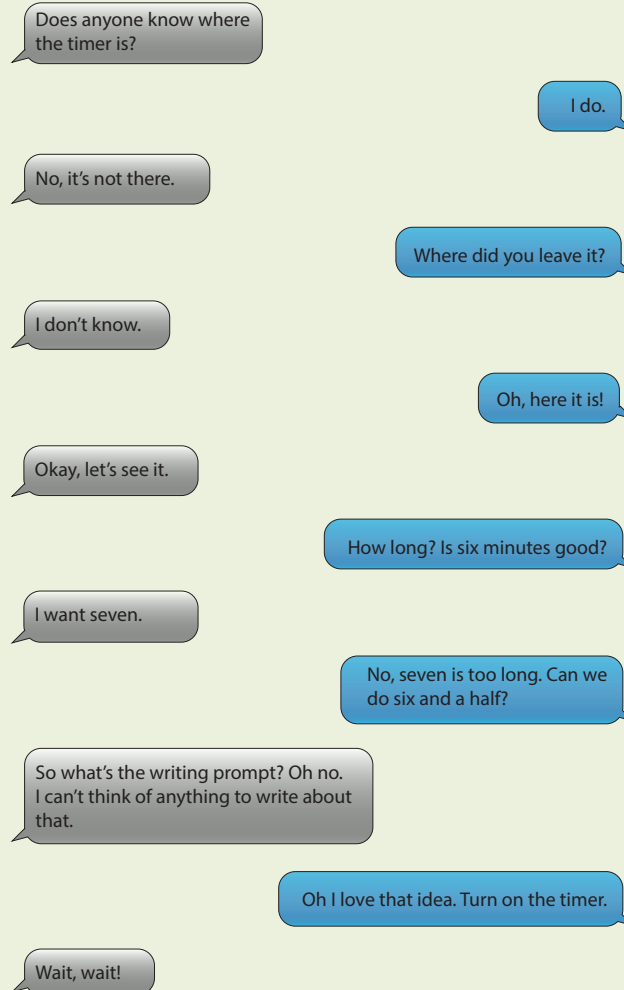
As they get comfortable using the pencil or keyboard to act like their mouths in speaking (the vehicle through which meaning comes), they will find that their writing sounds more and more like them. It will eventually mirror the sophistication of their oral development.

Mechanical skills can be taught using *someone else's* writing (through copywork and dictation practices – more about those in *The Writer's Jungle* and on the Brave Writer website).

For now, focus on freedom and liberate your kids from the drudgery of fitting into a format. To make freewriting a more meaningful experience, this product includes some fabulous freewriting prompts and activities. Use these once a week to keep the pencils moving. Psst. You ought to freewrite too. It makes a big difference in your ability to be supportive, compassionate, and competent in the role of editor, too.

Freewriting Frenzy

Before we get started, I'd like to share with you how freewriting looked in my home while I home educated my five children:



Finally, the executive decision is made and the timer springs to life, ticking for all to hear. Pencils race across the page with a few random cries: “How much longer?” and “I’m running out of things to say.” I watch as one child’s hand flies over the preset lines and the other child struggles to get control of the pencil. I notice that one child has a scrunched up brow while the other one is smiling and giggling the whole way. Suddenly one of them laughs... and keeps writing.

Ding! Time’s up. One drops his pencil and falls backwards in the chair as though having just won a lacrosse match. The other yells, “Just a minute, I need to finish this sentence.”

When I give them the chance to read their writing aloud, both decline. And that's okay! It's their work, their opportunity to share or not. Privacy is a privilege of original writing.

Another successful freewriting session.

There is one rule in freewriting: keep the pencil moving for the whole time period. That's it. If your child has done that, she's successfully completed a freewrite. The content is irrelevant.

Let me rephrase that.

It's not that the content is irrelevant in a cosmic way, as though it has no meaning and could disappear into a wormhole and no one would notice. Rather, it's that freewriting is not judged by content. It is judged by will, effort, wrestling the tiger called writing to the floor. Freewriting is about concentration and commitment, not about fulfillment of scope and sequence or accurate punctuation or powerful prose.

This is one time you can commend your child for effort and really mean it. You aren't saying "Nice kick when you tried to score a goal" secretly annoyed that he didn't kick the ball hard enough to score. This is a moment when the sheer effort IS the triumph, is the success, is the note-worthy aspect of the game.

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And surprisingly, almost as if by accident, the child who freewrites often, develops better and better content over time. Not in a linear way, mind you, but over years of consistent practice. Freewriting helps writers to reduce the distance between what they want to say and the struggle to say it. Freewriting develops the most critical skill a writer needs: courage to face the blank page and then to stare it down with words.

Why it works

Let's look a bit more closely at freewriting and why it is critical to growth as a writer. Most professional writers will tell you that they write as a discipline, a daily habit, as medicine. Some call their freewriting "morning pages" or journaling. Others simply tell you that they write every day, either following a random prompt or downloading their cluttered thoughts onto a screen or paper before they start their "real" writing.

There's a method to the madness, of course. Giving up control over content frees the mind to shift gears from verbal communication to written form. While both written and verbal speech draw on language that comes from within, talking implies conversation, partnership, and a shared burden.

When you talk, you are usually talking *to* someone. You are permitted to interrupt yourself and start over, to take cues from the listener, to stop and start and get encouragement from questions and facial expressions. Your conversation partner even adds content, words, and ideas to the dialog. In short, talking means you are not alone.

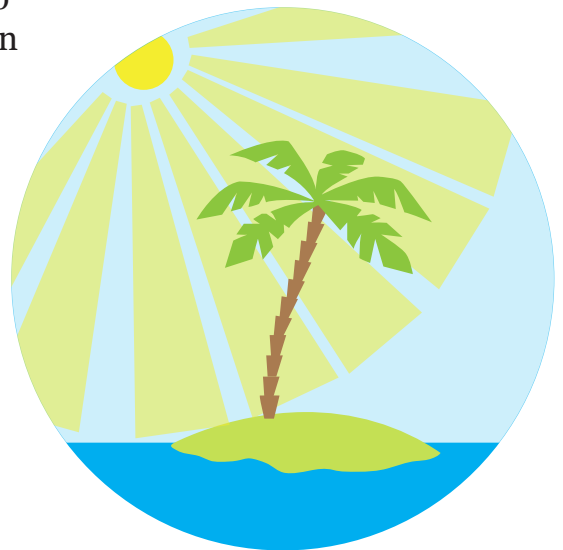
On the flip side is writing. Writing is the most solitary of activities. You conceive of the ideas inside, you put them on a page without a witness, you polish them, and then serve them to be read when you are not present. At no point in the process do you have that natural connection to another person, someone to reassure you, and help you get that idea from head to page.

Brave Writer trains parents to act as the conversation partner the fledgling writer needs as he or she learns to write.

Brave Writer trains parents to act as the conversation partner the fledgling writer needs as he or she learns to write. Parents externalize the process by literally talking, reading the writing aloud, offering ideas for expansion and revision, providing enthusiasm for the developing piece, suggesting resources the writer can't think of on his own. Parents of young writers are the other half of the written conversation while their children live at home. They provide the kinds of support and enthusiasm, natural correction and expansion to writing, that they happily, naturally offered to spoken communication.

The goal is for the young writer to mature into a confident and competent *independent* writer, true. First, however, a muscle must be developed within that enables the writer to dialog with self, to provide the kinds of questions that dig deeper, that encourage and applaud the thinking necessary to writing. Writing isn't challenging because it's

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complicated. Writing is challenging because it's solitary. Writers are left alone on a deserted island, sun beating down, sand in their eyes and hair. They must write without help, without praise, without lemonade.

To become a competent writer means more than mastering technique. It means shaking hands with oneself and promising to stand by and lend support when the going gets tough. Writing requires an inner partner. That partner grows and matures along with your writing.

Sometimes it helps to let kids know that they will be learning how to help themselves when they write. Each time they face an obstacle and a part of them comes up with a possible solution to overcome the block, they've just encouraged that inner partner to work harder the next time. If a child feels constrained by writing with a pencil on the kitchen table with everyone watching and suddenly says, "May I please go write on the floor behind the piano so I can concentrate?" you need to jump up and down in praise. That's the child's writing partner lending support. The writer has a friend inside who is thinking of ways to help the writer come out to play.

If your child needs his shoulders rubbed or wants to talk before writing or likes to turn on his iPod while freewriting, let him. This is the time to let that inner partner grow and take risks. Not all of the ideas offered will work. If writing on the floor behind the piano means becoming distracted by the piano keys which leads to playing music instead of writing, then the writer learns that the inner partner's suggestion this time wasn't such a good one.

But over time, as the child pays attention to her hunches and needs, the inner partner becomes an ally. That ally will learn how to give feedback, will help the

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child figure out the best way to say something. In short, the most comfortable writers are those who feel competent to evaluate their own work. Homeschooling parents help their kids get there by giving lots of space to their kids so that the inner partner has space to develop. They act as the external partner, initially, as a model of how a writer can think for herself and become able to create her own writing rhythm and practice. Freewriting is one of the best ways to encourage that inner partner to speak up.

Let me give you a profile of what it looks like to live in the head of a writer. The following is a journey through the jungle of my writing life.

It works like this

The graphic below is an illustration of how I've written books, papers, essays, articles, my Master's thesis, my curriculum guides, and song lyrics. It's a slowly expanding process by which I add layers of words and ideas to the original content. I include this meandering description because too often we are seduced by finished products to think that the final version is the way the writing was birthed—as though the basic form and content were all there initially, save a few edits and typo corrections. Rarely is that true. For kids, it's even less true.

What I do			
I read the assignment. I reread it. I put it away. I get up to make tea. I start thinking about the topic. Then my mind wanders, the phone rings, and I forget the topic. So I reread it.			
What I think about while I do it	As I go, I intuitively ask myself questions: What word sounds better here? What image stood out to me? How can I say that so that it fits with this format? Who else said things about this topic that I can read or quote?	Then I open a page on my computer and I type a few words. I usually reread the topic right about then. Then I pour out initial ideas, I reject them, then I add to them, then I resurrect a few of the rejected ones, then I suddenly remember an experience that correlates so I add it, then I follow that path all the way through where new ideas pop through the bushes and realize that most of them don't relate but I love being reminded of them.	I also notice the stuff I don't know. My initial writing is vague, incomplete, filled with sweeping generalizations. But I keep going. I don't mind. The generalizations are like place-holders. I know the direction I want the writing to take so I let those big ideas sit there unfinished so that I know what to write about later. When I get tired, or bored, or I hear my email go "ding!" I stop. I might even stop for the rest of the day.
		The next day I return to the page. I reread the topic (I read it over and over during creation so that I keep the main idea in mind) and then I reread what I wrote the day before. I sit with that for a little bit (perhaps sip another cup of tea) and then I pick a place in the writing (beginning, middle, or end) and start adding to the content	

Freewriting, then, gives permission to wade around up to your knees in words and thoughts, in resistance and confusion, in inspiration and hope. As freewriting becomes a way of life, your kids will learn their own writing rhythm, which will help them become the writers they are meant to be.

Talk to your kids about the journey of developing their own writing practice. Ask them what they think helps them to focus and concentrate, to feel free and unfettered. Always offer brownies.

Without further ado, let's get to some new ways to freewrite, shall we?

A frenzy of freewriting practices

Practice 1

Bare Bones Freewriting

Set the timer for a predetermined length, grab a pen or pencil, and scratch paper. Turn on the timer and write, the whole time, without stopping to edit the content, to figure out spellings, or to erase a mistake. Write whatever comes to mind, even words like, "This is really hard. I'm bored. I wish I could go to Tahiti." When the timer dings, you're finished. Read it back to yourself, or not; read it to an interested audience, or not; save it, or throw it away. You decide.

Practice 2

Freewriting to a Prompt:

Prompts give the freewriting a focus. As the word implies, a freewriting prompt will "prompt" the writer to think about an idea, word, image, or memory. The prompt enables the writer to jump off the diving board and into the water heading in a specific direction. However, because this is freewriting, if the writer wants to change directions, that's okay. It's okay to write "against" a prompt as well (if the prompt is to write about how lovely it is in the fall, you can write about how rotten the fall is). The prompt is not a script, but a "suggestion" – you know, prompting the writer to write.

One-word prompts to get you started:

- Red (or any color)
- Shout
- Mystery
- Dream
- Hot (or cold)
- Secret
- Island
- Triangle
- Surprise

Phrase starters:

- I like it best when....
- I used to... but now I...
- I wish...
- I will... only if...
- No one should ever in his (her) wildest dreams...
- Never say...
- Once in a great while, I get to...
- The last time _____ happened, I...

Write abouts:

- Write about...
- the one that got away
- the time you lied
- a friend you wish you had
- a character who discovers a key that unlocks a mysterious box
- losing your way
- the worst visitor who ever came to your house
- an ordinary day when something goes terribly wrong
- a surprise party
- the time you felt indispensable

Practice 3

Freewriting using material prompts.

(These are objects or pictures or word sources.)

1. **Put together a basket of objects**, cover them with a cloth and then reach inside and pull one out. Write about it.
2. **Gather a collection of photographs** (printed from the Internet, ads or illustrations from magazines, bookmarked images from an art book). Put these on a table and select one or two for a freewrite.
3. **Make a pile of words** (cut them out from magazines or handwrite them). Each word ought to be on one card. Grab three of them and then freewrite incorporating all of them.

Practice 4

Freewriting as Exploration

1. **Walk 150 paces away from your house.** Take pen and paper with you. Write when you get to the last step.
2. **Go on a Color Walk.** Pick a color and then take a walk outside. The walk must be at least 15 minutes in length, there can be no conversation, and you are meant

to look for your color on the walk. Note all the instances (or lack of them!) that you see it, pay attention to shades and how it appears in light and shadow, on inanimate objects versus in nature. Come home and write (before talking to anyone) for 10 minutes. You can turn it into a story about your color, an interview with Mr. Orange, or a narrative description of the walk and all the ways you saw or didn't see your color.

3. **Lie on your back in your yard in the same place at three different times of day.** Freewrite after each session for five minutes. Note the way things change or stay the same or how your thoughts change or stay the same.
4. **Freewrite in a coffee house.** Record snippets of conversation you overhear, describe what you see, look for items you ordinarily would miss and write about those, describe someone's outfit or hairstyle, jot down the flavor of the drink you have with you.

Practice 5

Five-Day Word Play:

Cut up lots of words from a magazine. Include nouns, verbs, and adjectives. Put them into a bowl.

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| Day 1: | Draw one word and start your freewrite with it. |
| Day 2: | Draw out a pair of words. Write about them. |
| Day 3: | Sort the words on the table and form a sentence (you can add linking words if there aren't articles or "to be" words etc. in your bunch). Start your freewrite with that sentence. |
| Day 4: | Sort the words by nouns and adjectives. Now pair the nouns randomly with adjectives. Pick your favorite pairs (two or three) and use them in a freewrite. Don't worry about making it make sense. You can start new topics for each pair or weave them all together. Whatever works. |
| Day 5: | Choose three nouns. Don't use them in your freewrite, but write about them. Convey the meaning by using synonyms and images that convey what they are without saying them. Resist the temptation to use any form of the word. Only use synonyms or images or other terms. |

Practice 6

Photographs:

Have someone pick out fifteen-twenty photographs. Lay them out on a table, some facing one way and some facing the other. Walk around the table silently looking at them until one starts to tell a story or memory. When it does, pick it up, move to a well-lit space and write the story it tells you. If you get stuck, look intently at the photo and describe something on it you didn't notice at first. Then follow that description with more writing.

Practice 7

Creative Writing Ideas:

- Write as though you are face-to-face with a wild animal.
- Rewrite the end of your favorite book (or write a scene that happens after the end of a favorite book).
- Eat a new fruit or vegetable and then write.
- Read a poem you like, copy the first line onto the page, and then write.
- Take a comment made at breakfast (or lunch or dinner) and use it to start a dialog. (Be sure to pay attention and listen for a good one liner.)
- Write a letter to your imaginary friend, or your teddy bear, or your bunny (or dog, or cat, or gerbil, or salamander).
- Write a letter to yourself from someone (what would you like that person or doll or pet to say to you?)

Practice 8

Creative Writing Places and Spaces:

- Write under a table, on a rock, next to a creek, in a coffee shop, on your bed, in a tree.
- Write while on a vacation.
- Write in a group (invite friends to write with you and choose one of the writing activities to do together).
- Write at the zoo, botanical gardens, the beach, in the dentist's office (write about the people waiting there and make things up about them).
- Write to two kinds of music. Write during one song today and a different one tomorrow, but put both pieces of writing together.

Practice 9

Freewriting Fiction:

- **Write a profile of your aunt** (or uncle or cousin). Now change her name, hair color and give her one brand new feature (a lisp, a limp, an accent, too much eye-shadow, mad skills in archery, a black belt in karate, a pet poodle). Write about a visit from this new aunt.
- **Close your eyes and remember a time you got injured.** Now give that injury to a character. Pick a character you know from another context (movie or book) or create a new character. Write about how that character broke his wrist skiing, or stitched over her finger in sewing class, or sliced open a toe when the salsa jar broke on it. Imagine how that character would react to the same experience you had. Use detail to convey the character's experience.
- **Find a photograph from a vacation or a magazine that depicts a place not home.** Put yourself and a favorite character from a book or movie into that setting. Describe the setting and then show us what you are doing there. Be specific – what do you see, smell, feel, know.
- **Write about a noise that won't go away.**
- **Your wish becomes someone's command.**
- **Your dog can talk!** What does he say? What happens?



Final thoughts about freewriting

One of the best freewriting stories I read came from a magazine. A mother and two daughters used to take a long train ride every week from one city to another. To pass the time, she and her girls decided to freewrite together for part of each trip. The mother wrote interesting prompts on small bits of paper and tucked them into an envelope. On each week's journey, one of the children would draw a prompt. They would set the timer on a stopwatch and all three, facing each other with the sights of New Zealand flying by, would write for the predetermined length of time (which apparently grew each week as the girls became more and more enthusiastic about this ad hoc writing club they had formed). At the end of the writing session, they had the option of sharing their writing. Sometimes they did; sometimes they didn't.

What began as one mother's desire to catalyze writing in her girls led her to discover her own writing talents and so she began to publish. Her girls took on greater and greater writing challenges, as well. The shared writing led them to learn things about each other that conversations might never have achieved. And best of all, they developed a lasting memory of that intimate risky time of writing together, sharing a kind of secret that created both bonds with each other and bonds with the power of writing.

If you want writing to be more than a school chore in your children's life, I strongly recommend that you write along with them. You may not be able to every week or every time. But if you deliberately choose to freewrite alongside them, taking the risks you expect them to take, sharing your work when you feel it's wobbly and not very good, you'll demonstrate how to grow as a writer. More importantly, you will grow as a writer and that will help you be a much better writing coach to your children too.

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New to Brave Writer?

Now that you've had a chance to try out a few writing strategies, you may be wondering what's next!

The best tool to transform your writing life is [The Writer's Jungle](#). *The Writer's Jungle* is the centerpiece to the Brave Writer lifestyle. In it, homeschooling parents find the insight, support and tools that help them become the most effective writing coaches their children will ever have.

The missing ingredient in writing curricula isn't how to structure a paragraph (information that can be readily found on the Internet). You don't need more facts about topic sentences or how to use libraries. Grammar and spelling are not the key components in writing, either, much to the chagrin of some English teachers.

- Are you tired of the blank page blank stare syndrome (hand a child a blank page; get back a blank stare)?
- Are you worried that you aren't a good enough writer to teach writing?
- Is your child bright, curious, and verbal but seems to lose her words when she is asked to write?
- Do you wonder how to expand the ideas in the sentences your child writes without damaging your relationship?
- Has writing become a place where tears flow and fears surface?
- Is your child a prolific writer and you aren't sure how to direct him to the next level?
- Have you tried "just about everything" and feel ready to give up on writing?

If you answered 'yes' to any of these questions, then *The Writer's Jungle* is for you!

Purchase it [here](#).

If you aren't quite ready to make the big investment, get your feet wet with an issue of [The Arrow](#) (3rd – 6th grades) or [The Boomerang](#) (7th – 10th grades)—intended to help you teach the mechanics of writing naturally and painlessly!

Enjoy your journey to Brave Writing!

