



The Fifty- Minute Essay

and Other Timed
Writing

Rebecca R. Butler

THE FIFTY-MINUTE ESSAY AND OTHER TIMED WRITING

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Dalton State College

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PREFACE

Teachers who are accustomed to any of the traditional approaches to composition will find all the familiar terms and strategies right here. They are simply connected to a time line and a step-by-step explanation that students find particularly clear.

Like many authors of textbooks, I suppose, I began this one when I found the books available simply did not reach my students. I needed more on the writing process, something I could use in conjunction with our handbook. I focused on tying each step in planning, writing, and proofreading to a timetable. I also supplied more writing samples, samples as much like those written by college students as possible.

As I looked at my students' work and thought about what they needed to accomplish in a single term and what I needed to teach them, I pinpointed three broad areas for attention. No reader of an essay can help but notice these three elements: content, organization, and standard written English. Therefore, I shaped my lectures and class activities so as to achieve a balance of all three. I explained what I meant by content, how to stay on topic, how to recognize the differences between generalizations and specifics, and how to choose concrete language. I explained the usual rhetorical methods for structuring a written discussion, and also the basic beginning-middle-ending-with-transitions. I provided written guidelines and classroom practice for legibility, grammar, punctuation, diction, and sentence structure, emphasizing as most serious those errors that disrupt the main clause. And at the same time I focused repeatedly on timing, showing students how to create an awareness of the time they use in writing, how to estimate their word-per-line, word-per-page, and word-per-minute rates. We practiced allotting a reasonable amount of time for planning, drafting, and proofreading an assignment. Together we worked toward a balance of meaningful, specific content in an appropriate organization with few if any errors in standard written English, composed and proofread within a single class meeting.

As I actually wrote the pages of each chapter, I was aware of the student. Like all of us, students fear having their writing scrutinized and found wanting. Most of them, unlike more practiced writers, are not aware of the shifting states of mind they experience as they compose. And very few of them know how crucial writing will be to their career progress. Therefore, I have taken special pains to write in an encouraging tone and

to show my student readers how to identify their strengths. I draw their attention to their *Creative Writer* and their *Editor*. They need to know that their abilities in thinking will not develop unless they write. They need to know that the best jobs require writing. So I have found opportunities to connect the material in this text with *real world* assignments and their marketability. True motivation comes from within, and once students discover that composition is not just an academic requirement to be lived through but a highly prized skill and theirs for the practice, they find the motivation.

DISTINCTIVE FEATURES

- The *Balanced Use of Time* chart serves as a one-page checklist with a time limit for each step in the planning, writing, and proofreading of an assignment with a deadline.
- *Brevity* makes the material more appealing to students to read in the first place and keeps their attention focused on the essentials.
- *Writing Samples* provide specific models on a variety of topics of the kinds of writing they may be expected to do.
- *Business Writing* models are included in the writing samples to suggest the value of writing beyond College.
- *Creative Writer* and *Editor* are the terms given to the states of mind needed for composing and proofreading, respectively. If a student is in the *Editor* mode when he should be composing, he will not get much written; if he is in the *Creative Writer* mode when he should be proofreading, he will not see obvious errors.
- *Answers to Exercises* allow students to pace themselves through the drill sentences and to improve their grasp of grammar and punctuation on their own.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

Chapter One, *Motivation, or, Why Write?* suggests some of the social and personal demands for writing as well as some of the rewards. In particular, it addresses ways for students to encourage themselves to succeed as competent writers. There is a section, too, on career marketability.

Chapter Two, *First Things First*, addresses the practical requirements of writing materials, legibility, and timing. It provides three writing samples and a list of typical topics. Most important for continued practice are the *Balanced Use of Time* checklist and a *Five-Paragraph Essay* schematic. A short section on the importance of reading concludes this important introduction to basics.

Chapter Three, *Planning*, explains, step by step, what to do in those first five to ten minutes, including tips on choosing a topic, consulting the dictionary, making notes and constructing a thesis statement. There are sections on vocabulary and on outlining and two writing samples.

Chapter Four, *Writing*, introduces the notions of *Creative Writer* and *Editor*, two very different states of mind necessary to effective writing.

Here, as well, are the traditional rhetorical patterns and argument, very briefly explained with examples. One of the writing samples comes from academia, the other from the world of business.

Chapter Five, *Proofreading*, explains how damaging a failure to proof-read can be and which are the most important errors to remove. Each error is accompanied by ample examples, each example with its own notation. There are two writing samples, one a company newsletter.

Chapter Six, *A Final Word*, lists five brief rules for effective communication in nontechnical language: clarity, coherence, continuity, completeness, and courtesy. Specific rules of diction, grammar, punctuation, or paragraph development follow each rule.

Chapter Seven, *Exercises*, provides sixteen exercises for the most important errors in standard written English with an answer key. There is also a list of additional essay topics.

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MOTIVATION OR WHY WRITE?

There are a great many reasons for writing, some of which are discussed here. Sometimes we write because someone else wants us to write. That is called an external reason; it comes from outside ourselves. But ultimately the writer's motivation comes from within. So we begin in this section by exploring what you want and how to harness your own energies for writing.

PERSONAL SATISFACTION

Three of the strongest internal calls to write are for self-expression, for pleasure, and for self-improvement.

SELF-EXPRESSION

Perhaps you have heard the expression, "I don't know what I think until I see what I have said." This amusing line suggests how human beings depend on objectifying their experience in order to understand it. It is very much like looking at your reflection in a mirror to see whether you need a shave, a different color jacket, a hat. Inside our minds, our thoughts are in constant flux; our impressions may be strongly felt but vaguely defined. Writing them out clarifies ourselves to ourselves. Once we know what we ourselves think, we can make ourselves understood to others.

Then there is responsibility within the community. In a democracy, it is vital that individuals practice self-expression. Unless leaders hear what their people need and want, they cannot be expected to respond. There are always groups with the means of lobbying, getting the legislators' attention, for their interests. Senior citizens have a lobby in Washington, D.C.; large industries have their lobbies; environmentalists have a lobby, and so on. Individuals, too, deserve attention from their local, state, and national governments, and they can get it by writing to the men and women who represent them.

PLEASURE

Watch the face of a five- or six-year-old writing his name. That is genuine pleasure you see there. In part, it is the pleasure of mastery; controlling

that marker or crayon, remembering the letters, and keeping the spacing even. There is also pleasure in naming one's self-identifying Me. She experiences another pleasure when she takes that writing, this name that means Her, and shows it to someone else—her mother, teacher, or grandfather. This is the beginning of communication, of sharing our innermost reality with others, a pleasure that meets one of the deepest human needs.

SELF-IMPROVEMENT OR HOW TO BRING OUT THE BEST IN YOURSELF

Here are a few ways to get and keep yourself in a productive frame of mind: Use encouraging words, find a study hideaway, look for like-minded friends, set goals, and give yourself rewards.

Never underestimate the power of encouraging words. Now this may sound strange if you haven't already discovered it for yourself, but think about the way you talk to an animal, a pet when you are praising it or trying to get it to do something new, something it doesn't understand or to teach it a command. Sweet little sounds are what we use with pets, babies, and other loved ones to convey friendly encouragement.

Now, some folks do seem to respond smartly to yells, grunts, and barked threats, and if you are one of these, by all means, take that commanding tone with yourself. In my experience, however, the severe style of instruction is too likely to provoke resistance, the last thing I want. It can even leave a scar behind. So when I need to change a habit or learn a new skill, I talk to myself (not necessarily out loud) as though I am my own child.

Seriously, earnestly, and tenderly, I tell myself how to do whatever it is, say, learn to write *I did* instead of *I done* or remember that *although* is a subordinating conjunction and not an introductory expression. I never call myself stupid and I never say, "I just can't do this." I fully understand that it may take some time for this change to sink in. I wouldn't expect to house-train a puppy in one day, and I do not expect immediate results with myself. I do not discourage easily. Every time I hear myself saying, "*I should of wrote*," I stop and change it to "*I should have written*." I may have to repeat the correction five times, ten times, but I know that eventually it will stick.

Next, whether at your own home or the school library, a relatively quiet place with a desk or table, an upright chair, and a good light source is essential. You want this to be like your own little cave or treehouse, but uppermost, the place you get real work done. The first thing you may have to practice is just sitting still for an hour at a time. Have something specific to accomplish: homework, a number of pages to read, notes to recopy, or note cards to write for a research paper.

Like-minded friends can keep you happy with your choice to do what it takes to become a good writer. Do your best to get to know other students who are serious about studying.

Setting goals makes it clear what you want to accomplish and lets you measure your success. Just wanting to "be a good writer" is pretty vague. Goals can be small (all the better to count your successes), but they should be specific. Instead of telling yourself that you will memorize all the punc-

tuation rules by Friday, pick something more manageable, such as the comma rules. In fact, a specific daily goal is an excellent motivator. Most of us find ourselves less likely to procrastinate when we have just one day to get it done.

Rewards! It is very important to reward yourself for work completed. If you do not recognize your successes, your motivation will evaporate. Now, these rewards do not have to be elaborate or expensive. For instance, sometimes there is nothing I want more than to sit in a comfy chair and stare out the window or watch ten minutes of television, a small bowl of popcorn within reach. I do not allow myself to do this *before* I complete my paperwork, only after, as a reward. If I have been working toward a big goal—finishing a long writing assignment or receiving an A in a course—then my reward will be greater, maybe a new sweater or tickets to a baseball game.

These are just a few of the ways to find that motivation you will need to persevere and finish the course you have selected for yourself. If you are interested in motivation as a subject or would like to see more examples, consult a psychology textbook or teacher.

CRITICAL THINKING

First of all, we need to understand that critical thinking is not negative thinking; “critical” in this phrase does not mean fault finding. Critical thinking looks for the important, the meaningful in a lecture, a newspaper article, or a textbook chapter. Critical thinking is analytical, meaning that it separates the parts of a whole in order to understand it better. A critical thinker can look at each sentence in a paragraph to see which one is the topic sentence, which ones supply the details and examples, whether or not there is a description or definition.

Writing makes us better thinkers and better readers because as we write, we go through the thought process of selecting the words and of creating the sentences to convey an idea. Having put together words, sentences, and paragraphs ourselves, we better appreciate someone else’s paragraphs. Once I have written what I know about—for instance, my ideal job—I have discovered ideas I probably did not even know I had, and at the same time, I have become aware of gaps in my knowledge, things I would like to know. There are levels of thinking we simply cannot reach without writing.

HIGHER EDUCATION EXPECTATIONS

Very few entering freshmen realize that composition is not just one more course that they must get behind them, but one in which they either learn skills to take on into their next courses or they flounder. Whatever major the student chooses—business, computer programming, or criminal justice—those courses will require her to analyze and discuss ideas.

First there are the textbooks themselves. In some you will see the kind of organization freshman English teaches: definition, comparison, classification, and cause-and-effect. In addition, there is a more sophisticated vocabulary, the technical terms at the heart of every discipline. Learning to understand the structure of paragraphs and essay discussion in composition class makes textbooks far easier to understand. Taking notes swiftly and efficiently, both in lectures and from texts, is a study skill recommended by all student counselors.

Second, in these college courses, the student will be presented with new ideas and asked to elaborate upon them, to define, to compare, and to examine causes-and-effects—in writing. These are the very basics of organization taught in freshman composition. Having mastered the building blocks of discussion in composition, the student will not put them behind him, but will use them to move more confidently into discussion questions and research projects, whether oral or written.

As you can imagine, unless a student gets herself into the habit of writing every day, she is likely to get bogged down in reading and writing assignments, if for no other reason than taking too long to capture ideas in notes and outlines. Writing efficiently is very important.

Because writing can mean the difference between passing and failing those more advanced content courses, many advisors recommend taking freshman composition as early as possible. You can motivate yourself to dive right in and become a writer by looking ahead and seeing what a difference it will make in your progress from freshman to sophomore to junior to senior year. And if you do not make the progress you expected to in that first freshman comp course, you do not give up or tell yourself that you cannot do it. You review what you learned during your first attempt, make a list of what you need to master, and go after it.

MONEY AND EMPLOYMENT

Very early pieces of writing, some surviving on clay tablets uncovered by archaeologists and translated by linguists, record business transactions. What could be more logical? Businesspeople, whether in ancient Mesopotamia or modern Atlanta, need to keep track of their inventories, negotiate contracts, and prepare and receive bills of lading and invoices. Accuracy and attention to detail are essential, and employees who can read and write to communicate competently and efficiently are valued.

As it was then, so it is now. Educators today are urged by businesspeople and by legislators to be rigorous in preparing students for earning a living. A new hire who cannot read piles of reports as well as write them is a disappointment; any job that will offer advancement will require writing. The minimum wage (no writing required) will be inadequate for anyone whose life will include paying rent and buying such essentials as groceries, clothing, and a car, not to mention paying for insurance and taxes. The best prepared graduates have the most options. Yes, it takes effort, and, human nature being what it is, making the effort is half the reward.

At most colleges and universities around the country, big and small companies search for graduates at job fairs every year. Perhaps they should hang a banner on their booths: "GOOD WRITING IS THE ROYAL ROAD TO JOB PROMOTION." Accounting majors know how much accounting course work they need to be marketable, and pharmacy majors know how much chemistry they need, but almost no one seems to know that any job with good prospects for promotion involves lots and lots of writing. Here are just some of the kinds of written tasks most employees deal with every day or every week: many kinds of reports, purchase orders, memos, business letters, proposals, travel expense requests and reports, mission statements, assessment goals and results, and evaluation statements. The list goes on. Writing samples of some of these business documents are provided in later chapters.

Obviously, knowing how to write under pressure will make your workday easier. For the present, concentrate on learning how to manage your time while writing the very best English that you are capable of. And the best of luck to you!

CHAPTER 2

FIRST THINGS FIRST

MATERIALS

This is a good place to talk about materials, the supplies that most writing teachers require and that you will want if you are teaching yourself. (Writing is one of those skills that all of us really teach ourselves.) The materials needed for producing presentable essays under deadline are few.

- A hardcover collegiate dictionary, most recent edition.
- Two ink pens (in case one stops writing), black or blue ink only (no erasable).*
- Fifty to 100 sheets of theme paper (regular or wide lined).
- A notebook or filler paper for making notes, planning, and drilling.
- A watch or clock [a built-in timer is useful (about \$15 at a discount department store, such as Wal-Mart)].

Another valuable book to have is a good *thesaurus*, a very helpful tool in building vocabulary and learning to make good distinctions between words. If there is no college bookstore in your community, the collegiate edition dictionary can be ordered from any bookstore and the other supplies are available in most drugstores.

In addition to these materials, you will need a clean, flat surface on which to write, one in a place where you can concentrate. The area does not have to be completely silent, but you do not want to be interrupted. Your writing time and place must be protected.

* Pencil is out of the question. What most students like about the pencil is that they can erase any mistakes. But it takes too much time to erase. Remember, this is a timed activity. Putting a single, and only a single, line through a letter, word, or phrase is much quicker and neater. Secondly, pencil smears and rubs off on hands and clothing, something your readers will not appreciate. Pencil marks fade over time, too, so if you look back at notes you made early in a course, or perhaps in a former course, they may be barely legible. Finally, most directions for timed essays require ink, so you want to accustom yourself to writing in ink.

TIMING AND LEGIBILITY

Now that you have your materials, you must learn how to put words on the page legibly and efficiently. This means, first, writing words of standard shape and size, leaving plenty of white space, and, finally, writing steadily enough to produce about ten words a minute. Not so hard, really.

First, then, *standard letter shape*: Take a look in penmanship practice books for grade-schoolers; these you can usually find in a drug-store. The cursive or handwritten letters that they present are good models. Basically, handwritten letters must be what readers expect to see, and not written so they are easily confused with other letters. For example, incompletely formed a's, o's, and u's can look alike; v's may look like u's; e's can look like i's, if i's are not dotted; circles instead of dots over i's make the whole word hard to read. Capital letters also must be a standard (easily recognizable) shape and larger than lowercase letters. The reader must be able to tell at a glance when a new sentence is beginning. For the same reason, words that should not be capitalized should not begin with large letters, and printed capitals must not be mixed in with cursive.

Next, it is the *white space* around letters and words that makes them legible. When letters are crowded together so that they touch or overlap or when words are strungtogetherlikethis with inadequate space between them, the reader's job becomes too frustrating.

Finally, each writer needs to know his own *words-per-minute* or *words-per-page* rate. Type-written pages total, on average, 250 words. But in a handwritten assignment, the total will depend on the size of your handwriting, and if you know how many words you are getting to a page, you will not waste time counting them as you write.

Take out a sheet of theme paper and a ballpoint pen and choose a simple topic such as "Describe what you saw on the way to school" or "Who is your favorite author and why?" Now, look at your wristwatch, note the time on your paper, and write steadily for five minutes.

You will do two counts. First, count the total words, omitting articles (a, an, the), and divide the word total by five. This figure is your words-per-minute. Now count the words on each line, for ten lines. Put the figure for each line in the margin, and then add the numbers for all ten lines. If your handwriting is smaller than average, you could get 7 on the first line, 8 on the next, 7, 9, 8, 6, 7, 9, 8, and 9 on the subsequent 8 lines for a subtotal of 78. The subtotal divided by ten = 7.8 or about eight words-per-line. Now count the lines on your theme paper. Say, there are twenty-three lines. You may need the top line for a title; you will definitely want to leave the bottom line blank for a bottom margin, so let's use the number twenty because it's a round number. Eight words-per-line times twenty lines, $8 \times 20 = 160$ words-per-page. Now you know that to produce a 400-word essay you will need to write three pages. Someone with larger handwriting may need to aim for four or even five pages.

This is a good place to mention printing. Students often ask if it is okay to print, since their printing is more legible than their cursive handwriting. The problem with printing is speed, or, more accurately, the lack of speed. When we print, we lift our pen from the page one, two, three, or even four times *per letter*; when we write cursive, the pen stays on the paper from the beginning of the word to the end. Obviously, this method saves time. If you feel that your cursive penmanship is hard to read, practice writing to a rhythm. That is, listen for or feel the rhythm your hand creates as it lays down the slopes and curves of the letters of each word. Staying in a rhythm will help you keep to a standard shape.

To summarize the key points made in the preceding text:

- Get a wristwatch.
- Use standard, recognizable letter shape.
- Make capitals clearly larger; lower case letters clearly smaller.
- Leave plenty of white space between words.
- Figure out your words-per-line so you will know your words-per-page.
- Practice a rhythmic cursive so you will not waste time printing.

WRITING SAMPLE

As soon as possible, a writing instructor wants her students to write something as a sample. This is usually something quite short, giving the teacher a chance to see the students' present skill level and giving the students a chance to determine what the teacher expects from them.

WRITING SAMPLE 1: AN IMPROMPTU ESSAY

Topic

Here's a writing sample on the writer's idea of the ideal teacher. Twenty minutes were allowed for writing.

My Ideal Teacher

Teachers are human, just like students, so none of them are completely ideal. However, if I could have an ideal teacher, I would make him intelligent, friendly, and fair.

Some students might want an easy teacher, but I prefer a teacher who really knows his subject and wants to teach it. What's the point of a teacher who doesn't or can't help me learn? Someone who will come up with interesting ways of getting the math formula or history lesson across to the class. An ideal teacher should also be friendly, easy to talk to. Mr. Franklin, my high school biology teacher, was very smart and very friendly. He always said some little something to every student as they walked into his room each day. He made time to answer any question and never made a student feel stupid. Of course, the best teachers are fair. Not only are they fair in grading and assigning homework, but they keep the class in order. Teachers who let some students disturb the rest of the class are not being fair to all.

I will be happy if my college professors have some of these qualities that make teachers ideal.

Good content and organization!

There are few errors in standard English, but one is serious, the fragment beginning on line 6. Pronoun agreement also needs attention.

Correct each marked mistake in green or pencil, and ask me about anything you don't understand.