

Writing without teachers

PETER ELBOW

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*This book is dedicated to those people
who actually use it—not just read it.*

Preface

MANY people are now trying to become less helpless, both personally and politically: trying to claim more control over their own lives. One of the ways people most lack control over their own lives is through lacking control over words. Especially written words. Words come at you on a piece of paper and you often feel helpless before them. And when you want to put some words of your own back on another piece of paper, you often feel even more helpless. This book tries to show how to gain control over words, but it requires working hard and finding others to work with you. I am trying to talk to all who want to work on their writing and I feel it as a huge and diverse audience: young people and adults in school, but especially young people and adults not in school.

Most books on writing try to describe the characteristics of good writing so as to help you produce it, and the characteristics of bad writing to help you avoid it. But not this book. Here you will find no descriptions of good and bad constructions, strong and weak sentences, correct and incorrect usages. When people try to tell me about good and bad writing it doesn't usually improve my writing at all; and when I try to tell other people it seldom improves their writing either. If you want a book to tell you the characteristics of good and bad writing, this is not it.

Instead I try for two things: 1) to help you actually generate

words better—more freely, lucidly, and powerfully: not make judgments about words but generate them better; 2) to help you improve your ability to make your *own* judgment about which parts of your own writing to keep and which parts to throw away.

The first three chapters help you generate words better: I give you an all-purpose writing exercise that improves the very process by which words come to you; I propose a way to make sense out of the confusing process of writing something; and I give concrete suggestions about how to have a better time writing.

The fourth and fifth chapters help you improve your own judgment about good and bad writing by helping you set up a teacherless writing class to learn how your words affect actual readers.

The appendix essay is not aimed at your writing. It represents my own desire to work out as carefully as I can—and share with those who may be curious—the premises and implications of this approach to writing better and seeking the truth about words.

The authority I call upon in writing a book about writing is my own long-standing difficulty in writing. It has always seemed to me as though people who wrote without turmoil and torture were in a completely different universe. And yet advice about writing always seemed to come from them and therefore to bear no relation to us who struggled and usually failed to write. But in the last few years I have struggled more successfully to get things written and make them work for at least some readers, and in watching myself do this I have developed the conviction I can give advice that speaks more directly to the experience of having a hard time writing. I have also reached the conviction that if you have special difficulty in writing, you are not necessarily further from writing well than someone who writes more easily.

A note to teachers. Though I particularly want this book to help students not enrolled in a writing class and people out of school altogether, nevertheless I think that most of the book will also be useful to students in a writing course. No matter what kind of writing course it might be, no matter what the age group, students will benefit from the freewriting exercises, the model of the writ-

ing process, the advice for self-management based on that model, and the techniques for finding out what words do to actual readers.

But what about the teacherless writing class itself? Can it have a teacher? Yes and no. I find I can set up a teacherless writing class in my own class *as long as I follow all the same procedures as everyone else*: I too must put in my piece of writing each week; I too must get everyone's responses and reactions to it; I too must give my own reactions to other pieces of writing. I find I'm most useful to a class if I submit pieces of writing that I'm still unsure of (which is almost unavoidable if I have to come up with something every week), and if I reveal my own reactions to other pieces of writing in such a way that students can feel these reactions are very much mine, personal, and idiosyncratic—not attempts to attain some general or correct perception of the words. When I succeed at this I help break the ice and encourage them to share their reactions and responses even if they don't trust them. In short, I can only set up something like the teacherless class in my own class if I adopt more the role of a learner and less the role of a teacher.

In proposing the teacherless writing class I am not trying to deny that there are good writing teachers. I know a few and it is impossible to miss them: they are people who simply succeed in helping most of their students write better and more satisfyingly. But they are exceedingly rare. Any such teacher should keep up whatever he or she is doing and try to tell others what it is. Any student of such a teacher should also keep it up and be grateful.

But in proposing the teacherless writing class I am trying to deny something—something that is often assumed: *the necessary connection between learning and teaching*. The teacherless writing class is a place where there is learning but no teaching. It is possible to learn something and not be taught. It is possible to be a student and not have a teacher. If the student's function is to learn and the teacher's to teach, then the student can function without a teacher, but the teacher cannot function without a student. I was surprised and chagrined that in twenty years of being a student and eight years of teaching I had not before formulated

this homely truth. I think teachers learn to be more *useful* when it is clearer that they are not *necessary*. The teacherless class has helped me as a teacher because it an ideal laboratory for learning along with students and being useful to them in that way. I think it can help other teachers in the same way.

I cannot adequately thank here all the people who have helped me in writing this book. In particular there are too many people to mention who have been members of experimental teacherless writing classes who have helped me learn by letting me listen to tapes of some of their classes. And I am grateful to the students of my own classes for what I have learned. In various ways the following people have particularly helped or taught me in my efforts to write this book: Max Day, Sally Dufek, A. R. Gurney, Cris Jones, Frank Pierce Jones, Jane Martin, Phyllis Stevens, Terry Walsh, Minor White, John Wright. My greatest gratitude is to my wife Cami for her reactions, suggestions, proofreading, and above all for her loving support.

Olympia, Washington
February 1973

P.E.

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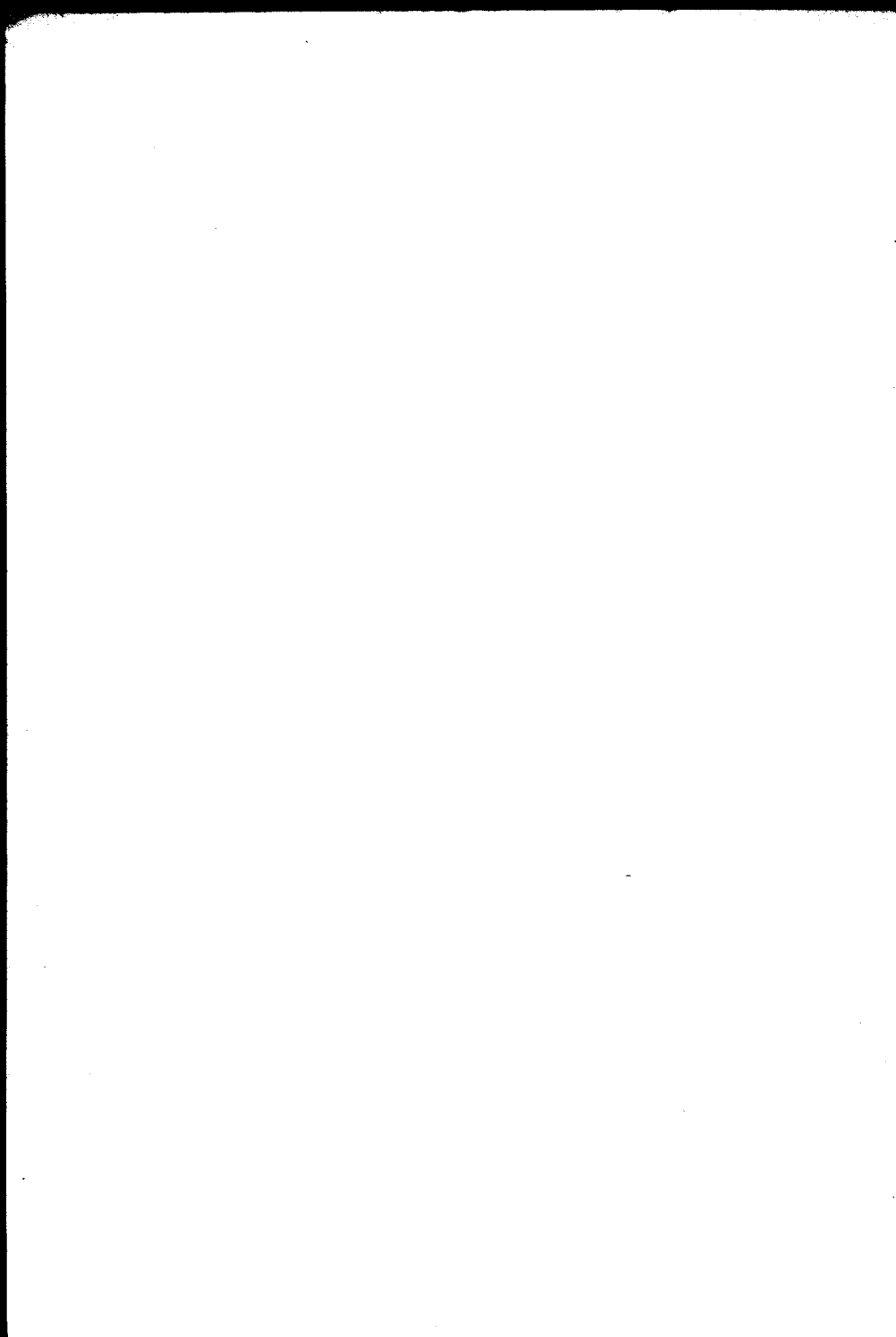
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WRITING WITHOUT TEACHERS



Freewriting Exercises

THE most effective way I know to improve your writing is to do freewriting exercises regularly. At least three times a week. They are sometimes called "automatic writing," "babbling," or "jabbering" exercises. The idea is simply to write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, "I can't think of it." Just put down something. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it's fine to write "I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say" as many times as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you *never* stop.

What happens to a freewriting exercise is important. It must be a piece of writing which, even if someone reads it, doesn't send any ripples back to you. It is like writing something and putting it in a bottle in the sea. The teacherless class helps your writing by providing maximum feedback.

Freewritings help you by providing no feedback at all. When I assign one, I invite the writer to let me read it. But also tell him to keep it if he prefers. I read it quickly and make no comments at all and I do not speak with him about it. The main thing is that a freewriting must never be evaluated in any way; in fact there must be no discussion or comment at all.

Here is an example of a fairly coherent exercise (sometimes they are very incoherent, which is fine):

I think I'll write what's on my mind, but the only thing on my mind right now is what to write for ten minutes. I've never done this before and I'm not prepared in any way—the sky is cloudy today, how's that? now I'm afraid I won't be able to think of what to write when I get to the end of the sentence—well, here I am at the end of the sentence—here I am again, again, again, again, at least I'm still writing—Now I ask is there some reason to be happy that I'm still writing—ah yes! Here comes the question again—What am I getting out of this? What point is there in it? It's almost obscene to always ask it but I seem to question everything that way and I was gonna say something else pertaining to that but I got so busy writing down the first part that I forgot what I was leading into. This is kind of fun oh don't stop writing—cars and trucks speeding by somewhere out the window, pens clittering across peoples' papers. The sky is still cloudy—is it symbolic that I should be mentioning it? Huh? I dunno. Maybe I should try colors, blue, red, dirty words—wait a minute—no can't do that, orange, yellow, arm tired, green pink violet magenta lavender red brown black green—now that I can't think of any more colors—just about done—relief? maybe.

HOW FREEWRITING EXERCISES HELP

Freewriting may seem crazy but actually it makes simple sense. Think of the difference between speaking and writing. Writing has the advantage of permitting more editing. But

that's its downfall too. Almost everybody interposes a massive and complicated series of editings between the time words start to be born into consciousness and when they finally come off the end of the pencil or typewriter onto the page. This is partly because schooling makes us obsessed with the "mistakes" we make in writing. Many people are constantly thinking about spelling and grammar as they try to write. I am always thinking about the awkwardness, wordiness, and general mushiness of my natural verbal product as I try to write down words.

But it's not just "mistakes" or "bad writing" we edit as we write. We also edit unacceptable thoughts and feelings, as we do in speaking. In writing there is more time to do it so the editing is heavier: when speaking, there's someone right there waiting for a reply and he'll get bored or think we're crazy if we don't come out with *something*. Most of the time in speaking, we settle for the catch-as-catch-can way in which the words tumble out. In writing, however, there's a chance to try to get them right. But the opportunity to get them right is a terrible burden: you can work for two hours trying to get a paragraph "right" and discover it's not right at all. And then give up.

Editing, *in itself*, is not the problem. Editing is usually necessary if we want to end up with something satisfactory. The problem is that editing goes on *at the same time* as producing. The editor is, as it were, constantly looking over the shoulder of the producer and constantly fiddling with what he's doing while he's in the middle of trying to do it. No wonder the producer gets nervous, jumpy, inhibited, and finally can't be coherent. It's an unnecessary burden to try to think of words and also worry at the same time whether they're the right words.

The main thing about freewriting is that it is *nonediting*. It is an exercise in bringing together the process of producing words and putting them down on the page. Practiced regularly, it undoes the ingrained habit of editing at the same time you are trying to produce. It will make writing less blocked because words will come more easily. You will use up more paper, but chew up fewer pencils.

Next time you write, notice how often you stop yourself from writing down something you were going to write down. Or else cross it out after it's written. "Naturally," you say, "it wasn't any good." But think for a moment about the occasions when you spoke well. Seldom was it because you first got the beginning just right. Usually it was a matter of a halting or even garbled beginning, but you kept going and your speech finally became coherent and even powerful. There is a lesson here for writing: trying to get the beginning just right is a formula for failure—and probably a secret tactic to make yourself give up writing. Make some words, whatever they are, and then grab hold of that line and reel in as hard as you can. Afterwards you can throw away lousy beginnings and make new ones. This is the quickest way to get into good writing.

The habit of compulsive, premature editing doesn't just make writing hard. It also makes writing dead. Your voice is damped out by all the interruptions, changes, and hesitations between the consciousness and the page. In your natural way of producing words there is a sound, a texture, a rhythm—a voice—which is the main source of power in your writing. I don't know how it works, but this voice is the force that will make a reader listen to you, the energy that drives the meanings through his thick skull. Maybe you don't *like* your voice; maybe people have made fun of it. But it's the only

voice you've got. It's your only source of power. You better get back into it, no matter what you think of it. If you keep writing in it, it may change into something you like better. But if you abandon it, you'll likely never have a voice and never be heard.

Freewritings are vacuums. Gradually you will begin to carry over into your regular writing some of the voice, force, and connectedness that creep into those vacuums.

FREEWRITING AND GARBAGE

I find freewriting offends some people. They accuse it of being an invitation to write garbage.

Yes and No.

Yes, it produces garbage, but that's all right. What is feared seems to be some kind of infection: "I've struggled so hard to make my writing cleaner, more organized, less chaotic, struggled so hard to be less helpless and confused in the face of a blank piece of paper. And I've made some progress. If I allow myself to write garbage or randomness *even for short periods*, the chaos will regain a foothold and sneak back to overwhelm me again."

Bad writing doesn't infect in this way. It might if you did nothing but freewriting—if you gave up all efforts at care, discrimination, and precision. But no one asks you to give up careful writing. It turns out, in fact, that these brief exercises in not caring help you care better afterward.

A word about being "careless." In freewriting exercises you should not stop, go back, correct, or reflect. In a sense this means "be careless." But there is a different kind of carelessness: not giving full attention, focus, or energy. Freewriting