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# STEPPING INTO THE MARGINS: THE ART OF TEACHER(LESS) COMPOSING

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## Abstract

A junior high teacher designed a writing class around freewriting with a series of routines that emphasize writer agency and a culture of support. This article chronicles how one teacher learned to believe in the value of freewriting as the core curriculum of her writing class. The author presents practices that evolved from Peter Elbow's conception of freewriting, writing-related artifacts that support the development of a writing identity, and what a semester of freewriting suggests about the role of the teacher in a writing class.

## Keywords

low stakes writing, writing workshop, writing instruction, reflection, assessment, freewriting

“Good morning, I have some ideas for writing today. First, a word: assiduous. My husband is concerned that I may be too assiduous—but in the wrong areas of my life. I work really hard at reading and writing but not really hard to keep up our apartment. I leave dishes in the sink. Are you assiduous? In what areas of your life?” I say.

It's first period on a Monday morning. One student is looking in his trapper for his journal. Another student is reading a flyer about the upcoming junior high dance. I take a breath to give students time to settle in, but a few are looking at me with a knowing smile while others have already begun to write.

“Next: art,” I continue. “Art is another idea for today. I notice some students doodling during class, and sometimes that doodling is pretty amazing. What do you think? Is doodling art?”

I lock eyes with Julia, one of the students I know to be a great artist. I wonder if she will write about this one today.

“Now for a story: you may have a story on your mind already, but if you're in the mood for story-writing, how about this first line to start a story? Or maybe you need some help getting into a writing flow today, so a list might be a good way to get your pencil moving. Make list of five things you'd like to change in the world, and why not try some anaphora, which is the repetition of phrases at the beginning of lines. So, several of options today,” I say.

The students know this routine, and they know that the topics I mention are merely suggestions for writing (see Table 1), but tell them that they are always free to reject these ideas and write about whatever is in their hearts or on their minds. The first seven minutes of class is theirs to write with only one rule: no walk, no talk.

“Okay, let’s begin in five, four, three, two, write,” I say, and by the time I say “write,” almost all thirty of the students in first period are writing.

I begin each class this way, whether it is a junior high class or a college course. I project a slide with a few writing ideas, talk through the different modes (informational, argument, narrative, and poetry), and then we write. As the semester continues, student-writers launch the writing by creating writing slides. And as students write, I write. Then about four minutes in, I walk around. If a student hasn’t started, I kneel down and talk through some ideas until they find a writing thread. I also watch for students who are finding the flow—getting into their writing—and students who are doing a combination of imagining on the page and in their minds. For those students, I can see in their eyes that they are working through a plot or argument. The process is different for every writer.

We actually call this beginning of class “compose for seven” because the word “compose” implies the creation of a work of art most often associated with music or poetry. In seven minutes, students create something that did not exist seven minutes prior. This is artistic labor that defies a singular process or result. (To see more writing ideas, access the QR code.) However, I do not see this as our “bellringer” or warm-up but rather the heart of our writing class and the most important work we do to nurture our writer identities. It is the deliberate emphasis on creating a community of writers by allocating substantial class time to *almost* freewriting. The practice demonstrates how writerly identity can only be developed by the actual practice of writing in a space that is at once autonomous and interdependent. Autonomous in the sense that writers must develop their own processes, but interdependent in that the writers need the shared time, space, audience, and inspiration that only a writing community—in this case a class—can offer.



In this article I share selected routines I have developed in the traditions of writing education leaders—Peter Elbow, Linda Rief, Nancie Atwell, Penny Kittle—to imagine a teacher(less) classroom: a place where lessons come from every writer and the act of writing. I share the story of when I finally committed to an all-freewrite semester and what I learned about writing and the role of the teacher.

**Table 1. Today’s Invitation to Write**

<p><b>Informational/Narrative:</b>  <i>Assiduous</i> means hardworking. Are you hardworking? Do you know people, characters on Netflix, or YouTubers who are hardworking? Describe the person/character and give examples of their assiduity. Try beginning with a story of the example.</p>	<p><b>Argument:</b> Art is something created with imagination and skill; it expresses important ideas or feelings. <b>Can doodling be considered art?</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● First, define doodling.</li> <li>● Then, discuss who would say it is art and why.</li> <li>● Then, discuss who would say it is not and why.</li> <li>● Finally, state your position as it relates to both sides.</li> </ul>
<p><b>Narrative:</b> <i>Everything stopped. People were like statues all around me. People in cars, men on bicycles,</i></p>	<p><b>Poem/List:</b> Make a list of five to ten things you wish you could change in the world, things</p>

<p><i>babies in strollers -- frozen in time, lifeless.</i></p> <p>Continue this story. Add sensory details to the setting. Try some dialogue. Invent names of the characters with a trait or phrase that is unique to them.</p>	<p>you wish you could do, places you wish to see, people who you care about -- you get the idea.</p> <p>To make it more poetic, use <b>anaphora</b> -- the repetition of a phrase at the beginning of each line: <i>I wish, I wish, I wish.</i></p>
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**Low Stakes Writing: Quickwrites and Freewriting**

Peter Elbow (1997) argues that teachers will have an easier and more productive time with student writing if we make a distinction between high stakes and low stakes writing and also between high stakes and low stakes ways of responding to student writing. Like the quickwrite, the purpose of low stakes assignments is to move students to think, learn, and understand more of the content. Low stakes writing is informal and thus tends to be graded (or not graded) as such. The benefits of daily practice in low stakes writing endure because it nurtures a habit of mind and way of being. High stakes writing also produces learning but the writer has a responsibility to the content and clarity for the reader (see Table 1).

**Table 2. Low Stakes Verses High Stakes Writing**

Low Stakes Writing	High Stakes Writing
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not graded</li> <li>• No specific conditions to meet</li> <li>• No assigned topic</li> <li>• Purpose to explore, express, try new approaches to writing or craft moves</li> <li>• Assumes it is personal and that no one will read it although an implied audience may exist</li> <li>• Varies based on the writer’s interests and writerly identity</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Graded for content and mechanics</li> <li>• Must conform to a guideline usually set by the teacher</li> <li>• Purpose to implement a lesson, think about a topic, and potentially to evaluate performance</li> <li>• Requires us to consider a formal audience but the teacher may be the only one who reads it</li> <li>• Varies in complexity based on age and stage of development</li> </ul>

Quickwrites are a brief response to prompts to start a lesson, activate prior knowledge, and provide a low-stakes writing opportunity (Fisher & Frey, 2012; Green, Smith, & Brown, 2007). Asking students to respond through written tasks is well established as a method for examining students’ prior knowledge before learning and for assessing learning during and after secondary classroom activities (Mason, Benedek-Wood, & Valasa, 2009). Quickwrites support content learning by presenting a nonthreatening, informal, and brief writing activity for students and can be used for assessing what students have learned in class activities and text reading (Fisher & Frey, 2004). Constructed paragraph responses, similar in format to the quickwrite, are included in standardized tests such as The National Assessment Educational Performance (The Nation’s Report Card, 2007) to evaluate student text comprehension.

In *The Quickwrite Handbook: 100 Mentor Texts to Jumpstart Your Students’ Thinking and Writing* (2018), Linda Rief advocates beginning class with a short piece of writing; she reads it out loud and invites students to do a quickwrite response. In just a few minutes, students are able to find a focus, bring a confluence of ideas inspired by the prompt together, and use stylistic devices to link everything together. The stakes are low, but this regular exercise builds confidence in writers. Rief

defines quickwrite as “a first draft response to a short piece of writing, usually no more than one page of poetry or prose, a drawing, an excerpt from a novel or a short picture book” (p. 3). Her framing of a quickwrite depends on a mentor text or a found idea so that the writing students see and hear pushes them into their own ideas: “This is writing to find writing, but using someone else’s words to stimulate their thinking” (p. 4).

However, quickwrites are not the same as freewriting. Freewriting means to write for ten minutes “without stopping, just write whatever words come out—whether or not you are thinking or in the mood” (Elbow, 1973, p. 3). I had been doing some form of a quickwrite as part of my instruction in English language arts for a long time as a bellringer or content warm-up or, as Rief suggests, “to use someone else’s words to stimulate their thinking” (2018, p. 4). However, I never committed to regular, consistent freewriting exercises as central to my curriculum until a few years ago when I began shifting my grading practices altogether (Donovan, 2015). Freewriting pedagogy requires that the teacher and writer “step outside of grading” (Elbow, 1996, p. 3). Elbow writes, “[E]very time teachers get students to do genuinely nongraded writing, they are inviting students to notice that the link between writing and grading can be broken—that it is possible to write and not worry about how the teacher will evaluate it—that it is possible to write in pursuit of one’s own goals and standards and not just someone else’s” (1996, p. 3). To help students write in support of *their* own goals, I had to commit to nongraded, freewriting consistently and value that work as such—not as peripheral to the class but *as* our class.

Our seventh grade English language arts class wrote on day one and wrote nearly every day after for the entire school year (except on days with typical schooling intrusions like fire and lockdown drills or testing). We did a combination of Linda Rief’s quickwrite and Peter Elbow’s freewrite in that we offered prompts and images to inspire writing, but we did not use mentor texts as Rief suggests. We began every class the way I began this article except my body and voice moved gradually into the margins.

### **Toward Teacherless Writing**

To be successful in this plan, I had to shift my position in the classroom to a co-writer rather than teacher. The more I think about the role and classroom positioning of “teacher” and “student,” the closer I came to admitting that these labels/positions create repression—the action or process of suppressing a thought or desire in oneself so that it remains unconscious—in the classroom. As long as students saw me as “the teacher,” they would ask my permission to write. Peter Elbow, in *Writing Without Teachers*, defines teacherless writing as such:

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 the teacher, but the teacher cannot function without the student ... 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 is an ideal laboratory for learning along with the students and being useful to them in that way. (1998, viii)

By starting class with the “compose for seven” every day for an entire semester, I tried to undo the culture of repression in student writing by trying to make conscious in students their thoughts and desires. In the forty minutes we had together each day, I tried to repress the teacher in me and make alive the writer in me—to be *useful* to the students and not *necessary*. And the truth is that once students learned to listen to their own interests and desires, they learned that they didn’t really need me to be a teacher; they just needed me to be a writer talking about how I came up with ideas, took risks, solved problems, and wrote to both express and learn.

Over time, the students then took on a supportive role for one another in leading the “compose for seven” and modeling their writerly ways. In this way, I saw our class as an *almost* totally freewriting class because, like Rief’s work with quickwrites, the daily slides used someone else’s words. I saw this as more of a scaffold and something many writers do—we look for inspiration. Students are truly free to write about whatever is in their hearts or on their minds.

The beginning-of-class routine shifted from my voice and body to theirs:

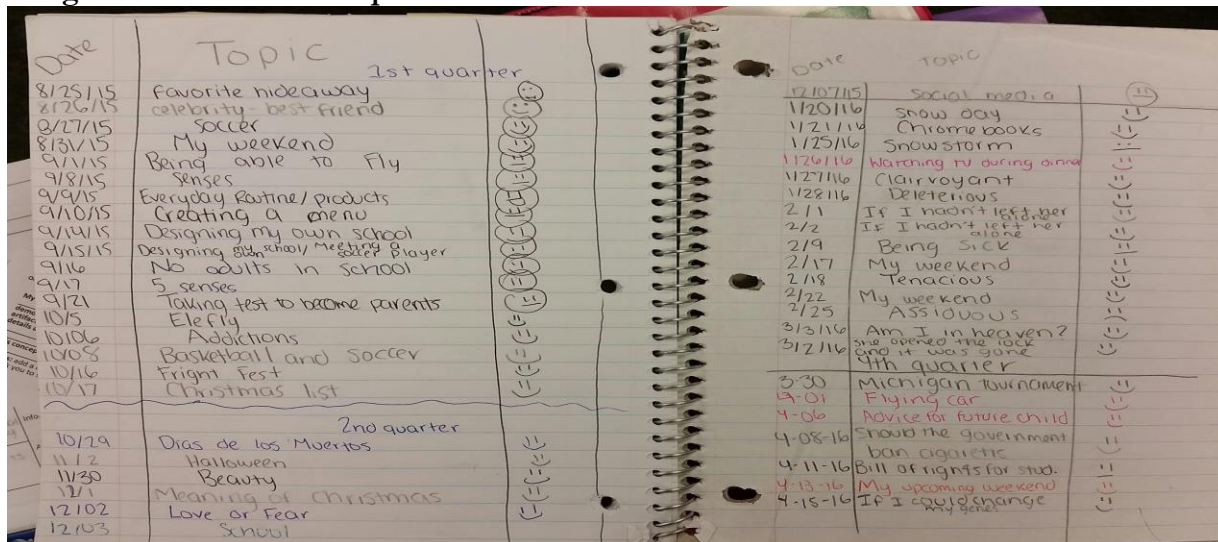
*Good morning, class. I hope you like the ideas I have created for you. The first is a picture of my Golden Retriever, Cookie. You can write about your own pet or create a story with Cookie as the hero. Another option is to make an argument. Here is a claim: Should junior high students be able to organize a walk-out during school hours? [This was right after the Stoneman Douglas school shooting.] Be sure you write about all the different sides. And if your writing today doesn’t come, maybe try a list. Let your parents know now what you’d like for Christmas.*

### Illuminating Your Writer Identity: The Flow Chart

The flow chart is the second routine of the freewrite classroom. When the freewrite exercise ends, I asked students to make a note in their “flow chart,” a page in the back of the notebook where they document the date, topic, and writing experience. Most students used smiley faces to indicate they found the flow or got into their writing, a straight mouth to indicate it was an “okay” writing experience, and a frown to indicate that writing was tough going that day. (See Image 1. Flow Chart Example.)

In creating and reflecting on the flowchart, a writer can, over time, begin to see trends in their choices and preferences along with patterns of engagement. While I did not read or collect students’ notebooks, I did look at their table of contents and shared my own to model what I was noticing in my writing preferences and style. In Table 2, for example, this writer found some inspiration in words from the slides; on January 27, they wrote about being “clairvoyant,” and on Jan. 28, they found the flow with “deleterious.” However, they did not have a joyful writing experience on February 25 with “assiduous.” (Notice the sad face?) The flow chart reveals that they have made choices to write about their life on some days and to try out new topics and modes on other days. In observing our writing habits, we can also acknowledge and accept that some days bring more words than others, and some topics comfort while others agitate.

Image 1. Flow Chart Example



### Nurturing a Community of Co-Teachers: Open Mic

One more freewrite routine is open mic. On Fridays, we don't write at all, so I guess we don't freewrite every day after all. Friday is for revisiting pieces, listening to what we created, and bearing witness to the voices of other writers. We listen. Students choose what they'd like to share—something from their notebook, something they are working on (that they'd like to try out on an audience), or something new. One writer wrote a rather formal argument piece on GMO's and was anxious for her next sharing day because she wanted to inform others. Another writer shared a stand-up comedy piece early in the semester; it bombed, but they reworked it and tried again later in the semester with more success.

During the open mic presentations, the audience listens for techniques to celebrate and keep notes so that they can compliment their fellow writers: modes, leads, sensory and figurative language, clever lines, and powerful phrases. Image 2. Open Mic Listening Sheet offers one the techniques and phrases that one writer heard from peers during open mic.

Image 2. Open Mic Listening Sheet

Name	Feature to Celebrate	Text Evidence	Check if you complimented the author. →
1. Sarah	Sensory language -- smell	"rotting stench of a fish left in the garbage for days"	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Christian	Non cliché - twists	"the 3 zebras looked at him" "black and white blobs with red paint"	<input type="checkbox"/>
3. Nick	Figurative language - Alliteration	"masked men" "moving metal"	<input type="checkbox"/>
4. Farjad	Pathos - Emotional	"Ever since the doctor said 3 months left, 2 months were gone"	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
5. Henry	Figurative Language - Metaphor	"Spider-webs of traps"	<input type="checkbox"/>
6. Prithika	Figurative Language - Allusion	"Jumanji god"	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
7. Isabelle	Pathos - insightful	"This made the cactus feel the one feeling he didn't want." Alone	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
8. Sophia	Innovative - suspense	"It gets closer and closer and closer until..."	<input type="checkbox"/>
9. Ben	Pathos - Humor Funny	"I expected something groundbreaking but I saw Spongebob"	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
10. Llyanna	Pathos - Emotional	"I wouldn't let the floorboards go down with my memories"	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
11. Lilia	Pathos - Emotional Powerful	"My heart filled up with shattered memories"	<input type="checkbox"/>
12. Jill	Pathos - Emotional Figurative Lang.	"Just remember that day comes after night and say goodbye"	<input type="checkbox"/>
13. Sebastian	Pathos - humor	"Bob lived in a cardboard box, made of cardboard blocks"	<input type="checkbox"/>
14. Grace	Figurative Language - metaphor	"I willingly water my tree with the flow of compassion and spirit"	<input type="checkbox"/>

After students shared, we held a celebration forum where students complimented each other's work, also practicing how to accept praise. This is an example of how a compliment might sound:

**Listener (looking at the writer):** I would like to celebrate Jennifer's evidence when she said Americans eat a bathtub full of sugar each year. This is a powerful image, too.

**Writer (looking at the listener):** Thank you.

The tone of this exchange is observational which develops a positive, supportive writing community that is not concerned with evaluating but in nurturing healthy writing identities.

### Navigating Grades

My teacher/less role was undermined twice that semester: midterm and final grade reporting. I have only ever worked at institutions that require me to conflate weeks of writing—artifacts and

experiences that defy measurement—into one letter grade. The best I have learned to do is to invite writers to self-evaluate and assign themselves a grade for their freewriting. When students look at their writing over time, make observations, reflect on their contributions to other writers, honor writers who have inspired them, and set goals for themselves, there is no denying that freewriting routines permit genuine writerly work. Most students give themselves an “A” or “B” because they have, indeed, demonstrated growth and a deeper understanding of composition. They have done the work because they found their reason to write.

To document this growth for stakeholders—administrators, parents, and colleagues—I asked students to craft an evaluation that addressed the following questions: 1) What do you notice about your freewriting over time? 2) Which pieces are your favorite and why? 3) What have you noticed about your classmates’ writing and our writing community this semester? (See Image 3. Quarter 1 Table of Contents and Table 2. Quarter 1 Reflections.) In these self-evaluations, I heard the voices of sophisticated writers who could point to what they liked and why, what and who taught them and how. In the open mic, students felt how a beautiful sentence could move their hearts or trigger laughter. They learned from and about one another. And they became more conscious of *their* writing process.

Image 3. Quarter 1 Table of Contents

Q1 Table of Contents			
Date	Topic / Title	Form	Length
8/17/18	Introducing Jillian	Script- Inform	1 1/2 pages
8/20/18	Dancing On Stage	Narrative	1/3 page
8/21/18	Reporter and Bird	Narrative	1/2 page
8/22/18	Delivery Disaster	Letter	1 page
8/27/18	Magic Stone	Narrative	1/2 page
8/28/18	Impatient Barista	Dialogue (Nar.)	1 1/2 pages
8/29/18	Monkey Attack	Narrative	1 1/2 pages
9/5/18	King of the Jungle	Narrative	1/2 page
9/6/18	Land of Imagination	Interview (Nar.)	3/4 page
9/9/18	Life on the Horizon	Narrative	1/3 page
9/10/18	My Stories	List	2 pages
9/11/18	First Strip-Away + Unusual Place	Sketch	1 page
9/11/18	Horse Race	Narrative	3/4 page
9/13/18	I never should have come here	Narrative	3/4 page
9/17/18	Types of Leads	Table / Chart	1 page
9/18/18	Evacuation	Diary Entry	1/3 page
9/19/18	Lies	Argument	3/4 page
9/20/18	Paragraphing	List	1 page
9/20/18	Moving	Narrative	1/2 page
9/24/18	New School	Narrative	1/2 page
9/25/18	Jailing of Royalty	Narrative	1/2 page
9/26/18	Dialogue (Punc.)	Narrative	3/4 page
9/26/18	Complex Sentences	Acronym	1 page
10/2/18	Protest	Narrative	1/3 page
10/3/18	Columbus	Argument	3/4 page

**Table 3. Quarter 1 Reflections**

What I notice about my freewrites over time:	A favorite piece:	What I notice about our writing community:
<p>I have written about a variety of topics that range from <i>Dancing to Disaster</i> to <i>Protests</i> to <i>Worlds of Fiction!</i> I have written about many different topics, in various forms! I have written narratives, letters, diary entries, and arguments. I have certainly demonstrated a variety in my topics and formats. I notice the pieces "Protest," "Evacuation," and "Life on the Horizon" are much shorter than pieces such as "Monkey Attack," and "The impatient Barista" because of my unfamiliarity with the topics. Immigration is a topic that is very unfamiliar and mundane to me, which is what those pieces were about.</p>	<p>I am proud of "King of the Jungle" because I found it to be very descriptive and insightful, because I wrote from an animal's point of view. What inspired this piece was the courtyard outside of school. When I had looked outside it reminded me of a jungle, and then I began to daydream about the animals in a jungle, so there a lightbulb went off in my head. I thought about a proper king and then realized that there was a lot of rivalry for the best animal, which then influenced my writing. What I was trying to do in this piece was to show the rivalry and almost compare the differences of a lion and tiger, without revealing to the reader who exactly I was talking about. I used description to describe the creatures' feelings for clues without revealing any obvious clues, which was a new style of writing for me.</p>	<p>I am growing as a writer by listening to my peers and trying to incorporate more pathos and description like they do. I usually write with just narrating scenes, but as I listened to more and more of my peers, I tried to incorporate more descriptions and specific types of pathos, like humor. I saw many different topics that inspired some of my own writing, some that made me laugh, and others that made me cry.</p>

### Concluding Thoughts

The routines used in this writing class are based on my previous experiences learning how to teach writing in graduate school (where we studied Peter Elbow's work alongside George Hillocks, Nancie Atwell, Dan Kirby, and Tom Liner) and, more recently, in writing with other teachers in a monthly five-day writing challenge. Still, when it comes to teaching writing within a school, with the schedules and bells and testing and grading requirements, I found that the practices I knew were most important were often pushed to the margins for more teacher-directed writing units and common assessments. What writers need is time to write so that they can navigate all the decisions that writers make—mode, form, genre, sequence, tone, mood, technique, purpose, and process. And only in looking at a body of work, the cumulative effect of daily writing, can a writer (or the teacher required to submit a grade) begin know a student's writerly ways.

Looking back at the students' work shared in this article, I am humbled *not* to see my influence in their artifacts and reflections. Students came into class hoping to learn how to write or hoping *not* to have to do much writing. They looked to me, the teacher, for what to do, how to do it, and how well it was done. Together, we learned that there is no one writing process and that there is no such thing as the "best" writer or "best" way of writing. After our first eight weeks of only freewriting, students looked inward and to one another for what to do, how to do it, and how well it was done. They learned to recognize the value of other writers in a writing life. And I learned that a writing teacher perhaps serves students best by being useful as just another writer in the room.



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