Free Writing Exercise
(Courtesy of Penn State Graduate Writing Center)

Free Writing Exercise

"Free writing" is a very popular method of loosening up your brain and your hands, and getting yourself ready to write. Free writing is also an exercise in combating one of the most common causes of writer's block: an over-active internal censor. This type of exercise can easily function as part of a writing "routine" (you start each session by free writing for five minutes), or it can serve as an emergency measure, a way of shaking you loose from a momentary feeling of "stuckness."

Steps:

1. Get yourself set up in your writing space. Be comfortable (but alert), and capable of sitting still for a long period of time.

2. Take out a blank piece of paper and a writing utensil, or open a new word processing document on your computer. Also take out some type of time-keeping device (watch, alarm clock, stopwatch, or even just your computer's built-in clock).

3. Clear your mind (if you know breathing exercises or meditation activities, this is a good time to try them). Be particularly careful to remind yourself that what you are about to write is for your eyes only; it does not have to be coherent, grammatically correct, or even intelligible as language to anyone other than you.

4. Start writing, and don't stop for ten minutes (the amount of time is up to you, but at least five minutes is recommended). If you are hand writing: your pen or pencil cannot leave the paper. If you are typing: your hands cannot stop moving, you should hear a constant flow of sound from the keyboard.

The idea behind free writing is to get you going, even if your brain doesn't want to comply. If you have to write "I don't know what to write" over and over for the first minute or two, that's fine. Ideally, though, you should try to focus on some aspect of your current writing project that has been puzzling, intriguing, or annoying you. Even though the writing you produce during this time will not be ready to just insert into your project, you will be surprised at the number of usable phrases and concepts that come out of this exercise.
"Explain it to me" Exercise

Writing is a communicative act. One of the best ways to figure out how to say something is to actually try saying it to someone in front of whom you aren’t afraid to make a few mistakes.

Step 1: Write to a novice. Begin by taking some aspect of your project and attempting to explain it (either in writing or out loud) to a (real or imagined) "general reader" who doesn’t know anything about the topic: someone you just met on the street, or a grandparent, or an old high-school friend. If you are imagining your reader: this person is intelligent and interested, but does not know a lot about your topic; you will need to summarize the main dilemmas you are facing in language that is not too technical. The point of the exercise is not to re-produce the textbook for an introductory course, however: the person you are talking to wouldn’t want to wait around for you to provide all of the background anyway. Your job is to briefly and clearly explain what you think the main problem or issue is in the section you are currently working on.

Step 2: Write to your advisor. The problem with step 1 is that we are often writing to rather specialized audiences, or trying to write to a wide variety of audiences at once. The general explanation may not end up being related to what you actually have to say. If that’s the case, try swinging the audience pendulum in the exact opposite direction: imagine you are writing for an expert, possibly your advisor, but not in a formal setting. This person is an expert on your topic, is familiar with your work, and is there to help you solve problems. Instead of writing out paragraphs and sentences, arguments and charts for your advisor to critique, imagine you are writing an email describing your current stage in writing: what problems do you foresee, how do you understand this section as part of the larger project, as part of the discipline more generally, in the context of other people’s work. If your advisor is helpful and available, you might consider giving her/him this writing, or using it as notes for a conversation the two of you have about your project.

Step 3: Write to yourself. Ultimately, the only person keeping you from writing is yourself. Your “inner-critic,” the voice in your head that serves as “quality control” on your writing, can also often inhibit you from producing anything at all. For this part of the exercise, then, DON’T focus on producing intelligible, syntactically viable sentences; instead, write in shorthand to yourself, and explain to yourself what you like about the topic you’ve picked, what problems you are concerned with, etc.

None of these steps will necessarily produce writing that can be dropped directly into the project you are working on. They should serve two functions, though: 1) they will get you writing something, so that you are more comfortable with the simple act of writing, and 2) they will help you to brainstorm where to go next, to visualize the rest of the writing process. This exercise can be helpful when completed alone (to an imaginary audience), but more importantly: the benefits of talking with someone else about your writing cannot be overstated. Talking with other people makes writing easier, and if you have the opportunity to do so, take it.
20 Questions Exercise
(Courtesy of Penn State Graduate Writing Center)

20 Questions Exercise

These questions can serve as invention “jump starters,” providing a variety of approaches, ways of thinking about a given topic. If you are not sure what else to say on a given subject, run through this list and see if any of them apply. You can apply the list not only to the main topic of a given section, but also to the key terms/vocabulary.

1. What does X mean? (Definition)
2. What are the various features of X? (Description)
3. What are the component parts of X? (Simple Analysis)
4. How is X made or done? (Process Analysis)
5. How should X be made or done? (Directional Analysis)
6. What is the essential function of X? (Functional Analysis)
7. What are the causes of X? (Causal Analysis)
8. What are the consequences of X? (Causal Analysis)
9. What are the types of X? (Classification)
10. How is X like or unlike Y? (Comparison)
11. What is the present status of X? (Comparison)
12. What is the significance of X? (Interpretation)
13. What are the facts about X? (Reportage)
14. How did X happen? (Narration)
15. What kind of person is X? (Characterization/Profile)
16. What is my personal response to X? (Reflection)
17. What is my memory of X? (Reminiscence)
18. What is the value of X? (Evaluation)
19. What are the essential major points or features of X? (Summary)
20. What case can be made for or against X? (Persuasion)

(Adapted from Jacqueline Berke's Twenty Questions for the Writer)
**Hot Spotting Exercise**
(Courtesy of University of Nebraska-Lincoln Writing Center, http://www.unl.edu/writing/revision-practices)

*This is a great exercise if you’re having trouble writing enough content!*

Read through your draft, and find places where your writing is working – a sentence that expresses a thought-provoking idea, a strong or startling image, a central tensions, or a place that could be explored in more detail. These are the “hot spots”
Copy one of those onto a blank page.

Now write, using the hot spot as a new first sentence. Write for 10-15 minutes, or as long as you need to develop your ideas. Don’t worry if you “lose” your original idea, you may be in the process of finding a better one.

Repeat the process if necessary

Now, put your piece back together. Add the new writing, or substitute it in for something else. You might even take out large sections of the original writing and reorganize the rest around your new writing. Consider how your conception of the “whole” of this draft changes with the new material.

Ask yourself- write some directions for what you want to do with this writing the next time you work on it. What do you have to change about the text to include the new writing?

Reflect upon your revision process. What did you learn about your topic/your text from this process? Did you pursue a tangential idea? Deepen or extend an original idea? Change your perspective on the topic? Realize that you are really interested in another topic altogether?