

Study Guide

Freewriting with Purpose

Simple classroom techniques to help students make connections, think critically, and construct meaning



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* You can find out more about the book, preview the contents, and purchase a print or e-book version on [our website](#).

Introduction: Freewriting into Understanding

This study guide has been designed to help spark conversations about the use of freewriting within your classrooms. You may choose to focus on one set of questions for each chapter, or take the time to discuss them all. If you teach all subjects to your students, each chapter will be relevant. If you teach specific disciplines, it is recommended that you read the foundational chapters first (chapters 1–5), and then read the discipline-specific chapter afterwards.

Quotes to Ponder

“By freewriting across the curriculum, we use writing as a form of thinking and a way of knowing. Rather than it being an add-on to the content, it becomes an indispensable process on the learning journey.” – p. 9

“Freewriting is not a difficult process to implement and yet it makes a significant difference in teacher attitudes, student confidence, and, ultimately, in our students’ writing abilities.” – p. 10

Guiding Questions

1. Reread Peter Elbow’s description of the two types of writers at the top of page 8. Does his description reflect your experience with student writers over the years? What do you notice about the current writers in your classroom?
2. On page 8, Karen says, “...this two-stage process made perfect sense: first, we teach students how to get their words on paper, and then, we teach them how to enhance their work through revision. Separately.” Why might it be beneficial for students to divide the process of writing in this way?
3. How might writing within all subject areas help our students construct meaning?

1

First Things First

Quotes to Ponder

“For many, freewriting implies that our students are free to write whatever they want. Freewriting, however, is much more than that.” – p. 11

“Instead of sitting with “nothing to write,” students rewrite the prompt and persist. Lo and behold, it works! Students can write continuously.” – p. 11

“Take the plunge: write with your students!” – p. 14

Guiding Questions

1. Freewriting is a term you may have heard before. In this chapter, Karen describes a specific method of free-writing inspired by the work of Peter Elbow. What would you say are the critical components of freewriting as described in the book?
2. Why do you think the use of a prompt (and the rewriting of the prompt, if necessary) is so important for our student writers?
3. Karen recommends that the teacher writes *with students* during freewriting. What does she suggest are the advantages of writing with our students?
4. Is there anything that surprises you from this chapter? (For example: timeframe, optional sharing, the preference for paper over computers, a lack of focus on conventions, or the use of loose-leaf paper.)
5. Discuss the six benefits of freewriting as outlined on page 18–20.

2

The Importance of Sharing

Quotes to Ponder

“We cannot expect all our students to walk into the classroom with the confidence to share their writing or their ideas. Nor can we expect all our students to behave with inherent respect to their peers. We must deliberately create a community of learners. We must establish a climate where students can take risks, where they can share their thoughts and feelings and know that they will be respected. We must convey to the class that all members are worthy and have the right to have their voices heard.” – p. 24

“The act of writing is thought to be a solitary process, and it is. Writing improves, however, when we share it with others to gain feedback and perspective.” – p. 25

Guiding Questions

1. Why might it be useful to give students the option of sharing “all, some, or none” of their freewriting on any given day?
2. What are the important elements to consider when establishing *writing groups* with your students?
3. What are the two most important qualities of effective feedback as discussed on page 29? How do we ensure students engage in meaningful discussion and learn to provide effective feedback?
4. Have you ever engaged in writing conferences with your students? If so, what was your experience? If not, how might they be helpful in improving the writing of our students? Would a table similar to the one on page 33 be helpful to keep you intentional and consistent?

3

Freewriting Prompts

Quotes to Ponder

“Provide a two- or three-word prompt regardless of the circumstance.” – p. 35

“We are not dictating what our students write: they are going to write what comes to mind based on the few words we give them. The writing will therefore be wonderfully varied. Writing assignments on a given topic such as a summer vacation limit our students’ choices and, therefore, the level of engagement. Not all students want to write about their summer vacations. Freewriting prompts, however, can lead us anywhere!” – p. 35

Guiding Questions:

1. What do you notice about the prompts suggested in this chapter?
2. What are some of the prompts you might try with your students?
3. If you give your students a quotation to respond to, what type of prompt would you use to inspire student writing?
4. How might *A Writer’s Notebook* and *Heart Mapping* (inspired by Ralph Fletcher and Georgia Heard respectively) help students gather ideas for future writing?

4

Learning to Read like Writers

Quotes to Ponder

“When our students read, they read the words on a page without giving much thought to how they got there. In fact, the same is true for adults. Teaching students that the words on the page were put there deliberately — *specific words in specific combinations with a specific intent* — helps them realize that they, too, can write with intention. Thus, students need examples of good writing. This is where mentor texts enter the picture.” – p. 43

“Our students require the explicit teaching of specific skills to improve their writing. Teaching our students to read like writers, to examine what good writers do, is essential.” – p. 52

Guiding Questions

1. What makes a mentor text effective? Why are picture books excellent options no matter the age we teach?
2. Why does Karen suggest *keeping the author present* in our literary conversations about mentor texts?
3. How could you involve students in identifying examples to be used as mentor texts?
4. How might the creation of *Literacy Notebooks* reinforce and support our students’ learning? What form could *Literacy Notebooks* take in your classroom?

5

Working through the Writing Process: Freewriting as Impetus

Quotes to Ponder

“In some classrooms, I have noticed that *working through the writing process* means asking students to write a “good copy”: a clean, neat copy. The printing may be neater, but there are few (if any) changes from the initial draft. No wonder our students tend not to enjoy the process! If the “good copy” reflects no changes to their work, they don’t see the purpose of it.” – p. 53

“Some freewrites lend themselves more naturally to the process of revision and eventual publication than others... When it comes time to choose a freewrite to revise and edit, we can teach them to choose a piece of writing that has more depth and focus; as time goes by, students become astute in recognizing which pieces are most appropriate for this purpose.” – p. 53

Guiding Questions

1. What might be the benefits of giving students choice as to which freewrite to revise, edit, and eventually publish?
2. How are the processes of revision and editing different? On which should we spend more time?
3. Explore the structure for teaching skills on page 56. How is this structure similar to one you might use in your classroom currently? How is it different?
4. How does the *gradual release of responsibility* factor into our mini-lessons for maximum effectiveness?
5. What is your biggest take-away from this chapter?

6

Freewriting in Language Arts

Quotes to Ponder

“Those of us privileged to teach language arts have an opportunity to empower our students through the work we do. We empower our students to function in the world, to communicate effectively, to broaden their perspectives, to gain insight into the experiences of others, and to learn about themselves and their place in the world. Our curriculum is a diverse, rich compilation of human stories, both real and imagined.” – p. 63

“Freewriting can assist students in delving deeply into their own lives.” – p. 65

“Reading on its own is certainly beneficial but writing about our reading often enhances our understanding and helps to clarify our thinking.” – p. 66

Guiding Questions

1. How might you begin to use freewriting as part of your language arts routine?
2. How can freewriting be used intentionally as a warm-up for other writing?
3. When (and why) might it be appropriate to provide students with more than one prompt?
4. Consider one of your favorite books to read to your class. Or, choose a picture book from the list provided in this chapter. What freewriting prompt(s) might effectively spark reader response writing from the book you have chosen?

7

Freewriting in Social Studies

Quotes to Ponder

“When we contemplate and consider our social studies curriculums, we realize that we are ultimately teaching story: stories of the past, stories of individuals, and stories of societies.” – p. 77

“By studying, reflecting on, and discussing past events, students can develop attitudes, skills, and knowledge to help them understand the past, make sense of the world today, and construct their future. Writing is an important part of this process.” – p. 77

“We do not want our students to learn facts in isolation. We want them to understand and connect to the facts on the page. As teachers, we want to breathe life into learning. Stories accomplish this beautifully. Literature, therefore, helps our students understand an event, concept, or group of people on a deeper level; it also helps develop a sense of empathy.” – p. 79

Guiding Questions

1. Do you currently incorporate writing within your social studies classroom? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. What might we do with our students’ freewriting in social studies?
3. Why might the use of literature in social studies be so powerful?
4. How might photographs, videos, and artifacts be used effectively to spark writing?
5. How are you thinking about writing differently in social studies after reading this chapter? What specific ideas might you try?

8

Freewriting in Mathematics

Quotes to Ponder

“Although we associate math with numbers and symbols, it is essential for us to note the role of language within our math classes. After all, we teach math *through* language: both instruction language and academic language specific to math. Furthermore, our students use language to process the information we teach.” – p. 91

“When we watch students complete their work in math, we realize that sometimes they follow the steps and solve the problem and yet do not really understand *what* or *why* they are doing what they are doing. When they write about the experience of solving their math problems, however, they are forced to articulate what they did and why, which helps them monitor their learning and reinforce their understanding. This act of *thinking* through writing, then, often helps students feel more capable and confident about the math itself.” – p. 92

Guiding Questions

1. Do you currently incorporate writing within your mathematics classroom? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. How might writing about picture books and/or videos help students understand mathematical concepts or the prevalence of math in our world?
3. How (and when) might you use freewriting as a means of reflection in math class?
4. How are you thinking about writing differently in math class after reading this chapter? What specific ideas might you try?

9

Freewriting in Science

Quotes to Ponder

“Full disclosure: I do not have a scientific brain...It is for precisely this reason that freewriting is effective for me, and for all those students like me, in science. Freewriting gives our students the opportunity to process ideas and concepts: to think things through and articulate questions. Fortunately, it also assists those students with scientific brains. For them, freewriting is an exciting opportunity where they can demonstrate their understanding and push their thinking further.” – p. 99

“Freewriting in science helps make the content relevant to students and helps them understand how it affects their everyday world. Science surrounds us.” – p. 100

Guiding Questions

1. Do you currently incorporate writing within your science classroom? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Look through the list of books related to science on pages 101–104. How might some of these books connect to your specific science curriculum? How might you use them to inspire student writing?
3. How might writing about photographs, videos, or podcasts help students understand scientific concepts or make connections to the science that surrounds us in our world? Which of these sources would you like to explore further as a possible writing prompt?
4. How might freewriting be used to assist students before/during/after experiments or makerspace experiences?
5. Have you experienced a moment of awe in the natural world? Why then might writing in nature be especially powerful for students?
6. How are you thinking about writing differently in science class after reading this chapter? What specific ideas might you try?

10

Freewriting about the Fine Arts

Quotes to Ponder

“After an experience with Art, I often have an intense desire to write. And frequently, this writing is especially powerful. Creativity is triggered by creativity.” – p. 111

“Freewriting in the fine arts is primarily about process and rarely about taking our work through the writing process. Because music and visual art tend to tap into our emotions, the writing we do in these subjects often becomes quite poignant; the sharing time after our freewriting in these areas, therefore, is especially powerful. Thoughts about process, imagination, creativity, and emotional reactions often surface and can lead to interesting discussions.” – p. 112

Guiding Questions

1. Do you currently incorporate writing in your fine arts classes? If so, how? If not, why not?
2. Look through the list of picture books on pages 113 and 114. Which book(s) are you interested in pursuing further for use within your classroom? What writing prompt(s) might you try after reading the book(s) to your class?
3. Can you imagine how writing to music might affect the content or style of writing? What pieces of music might you play as your students write? What prompt(s) would you use?
4. Visual art can be calming, provocative, or stimulating. What painting(s) might you show students? What prompt(s) would you use?
5. How might you use freewriting to assist your students in reflecting on the process of *creating* art or music?

11

Freewriting for Health and Wellness

Quotes to Ponder

“Regardless of the grade we teach, we can build regular freewriting time into our teaching of health and wellness to enhance our students’ learning. Freewriting in health class tends to be especially reflective, insightful, and profound. Since this writing is often quite personal, once again we must honor our students’ choice to share all, some, or none of their writing with the class.” – p. 124

“By exposing students to experiences outside their own and by using freewriting as a tool for reflection, we can enable our students to better understand the complex world in which they live and their place within it.” – p. 132

Guiding Questions

1. How do you see the use of freewriting enhancing your teaching of the health and wellness curriculum?
2. How might you use freewriting to help your students come to a better understanding of self? What ideas are suggested in this chapter?
3. How might you use freewriting to help your students understand relationships or manage conflict?
4. Teaching and modelling empathy are integral to our classroom practices. What are some ways in which reading and writing can be vehicles for teaching empathy?
5. Writing is a tool that many individuals use to cope with stress and survive difficult circumstances. How can you teach students to use writing in this way?

12

Time to Pick Up Your Pen...

Quotes to Ponder

“Take what works for you and make it your own. Aim to adapt the ideas in this book to fit your needs and circumstances: this will ensure your most authentic teaching.” – p. 137

“Let us teach literacy, then, *as if our learners’ very lives depended upon it — as indeed they do*. Let us engage our students’ minds and touch their hearts.” – p. 138

Guiding Questions

1. Did you have any *aha moments* about the teaching of writing while reading this book?
2. We recognize that some people have a natural talent to write. However, it is also true that we, as teachers, can assist students in becoming better writers with deliberate instruction. How might you now approach writing differently in your classroom?

Freewriting with Purpose provides teachers with simple classroom techniques to help students make connections, think critically, and construct meaning. It argues that freewriting is a powerful method you can use to help students develop strong social emotional skills and become confident, compassionate citizens.

This timely book explores innovative ways to use writing as a form of thinking in all areas of the curriculum. It is committed to encouraging students to

- become more aware of their learning process
- make connections between a discipline of study and their own life experiences
- develop critical thinking skills
- construct meaning, deepening their understanding of the content
- engage more fully in the curriculum
- ultimately, become more confident, effective writers

Based on extensive classroom experience, this comprehensive resource covers the essentials of the freewriting process and explores how this technique can become the backbone of your classroom writing program. Through this technique, students are more eager to write. They understand that freewriting is about getting thoughts on paper, then revising and editing to improve the communication of those first thoughts.

Freewriting with Purpose empowers teachers to use the writing that accumulates through freewriting to target and teach specific skills. It demonstrates how the intentional use of mentor texts can provide both the method and models to dramatically improve the quality of student writing. Numerous mentor text titles are identified for each discipline of study.

This engaging book illustrates that, through freewriting in all areas of the curriculum, students will *write to learn* as they *learn to write* more effectively.

Greg Campbell



Karen Filewych has more than twenty years of educational experience as an elementary teacher, school administrator, and language arts consultant. In 2007, she completed her master of education degree in the area of literacy. Her busy life includes writing, teaching, and presenting workshops to teachers. Her website, Words Change Worlds, highlights the power of words and provides teachers with regular book reviews and teaching ideas. Karen is the author of *How Do I Get Them to Write?* She lives in Edmonton, Alberta, with her family.

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