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# 7. Freewriting: An Obvious and Easy Way to Speak onto the Page

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## PART TWO
## A Role for the Tongue In the Early Stages of Writing:  Treating Speech as Writing

### Introduction

The argument of this book is simple:  that we can enlist the language activity most people find easiest, *speaking*, for the language activity most people find hardest, *writing*.  In Part One, I explored potentialities.  The potential virtues in writing could be fairly quickly described;  there isn't so much news there.  I spent most of the section exploring speech, describing extensive array of little-recognized virtues that speaking and spoken language can offer writing.

Now in Parts Two and Three I will explore how writing can reap the payoff from all these potentialities in speech.  In Part Two, I focus on the early stages of writing where it is possible to do what I call "unplanned speaking onto the page," or using our "speaking gear" for writing.  In Part Three, I will focus on the late revising stages of writing where we can harness the resources of the tongue by reading aloud.

### More Defining:  Speaking and Writing as *Mental* Processes

In the Introduction to Part One, I looked at the differences between speaking and writing along three dimensions:

- *Speaking and writing as different physical activities*:  moving our mouths versus moving our fingers;

- *Speaking and writing as different sensory modalities or media*:  audible sounds existing in time versus visible marks existing in space;

- *Speaking and writing as different linguistic products*:  language that comes from mouths versus language that comes from fingers.  Here that the difference is not clear.  If we consider the full range of language that humans speak and write, there is an almost complete overlap between "speech and writing."  But if we restrict the focus and contrast only two common or even stereotypical uses of each mode--speech as casual conversation and writing as careful expository prose--then there are rich and interesting differences between "speech and writing."

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Some readers will suggest at this point that I also need to contrast speaking and writing as *social* or *contextual* processes, and point out how speech is usually a social dialogue with present-time listeners, and writing is usually a solitary activity and addressed to absent readers or no one in particular.  It's true that these conditions are common in our culture (and many others) and have deeply influenced most people's very conception of speech and writing, but they are far from the whole story about the conditions for human speaking and writing.  Furthermore, my main argument here is that we can radically change the social and contextual uses of speech and writing.  I began this line of thinking in a 1985 essay called "The Shifting Relationships Between Speech and Writing."

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Now I need to explore a fourth dimension in which speaking and writing can be contrasted: *speaking and writing as mental activities rather than physical activities.*

This distinction is central for my argument. And it happens to clear up the puzzle I mentioned earlier. When we *dictate* are we speaking or writing? Let's look more carefully.

Consider some famous writers. Isocrates helped shape our earliest sense of written prose, and like so many ancient "writers," he seldom physically *wrote*. He mostly dictated spoken words to a slave. (Dictation was a common practice through much of antiquity, but scholars think that Isocrates occasionally did put stylus to papyrus himself. See W. V. Harris *Ancient Literacy*. R. Thomeo. *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*.) Milton was blind when he wrote *Paradise Lost*, and dictated it to his daughter. People in modern offices have traditionally dictated letters to secretaries for typing out. And now we can buy voice activated software and just talk--while the computer turns our audible sounds into visible words.

The fact is, when people dictate letters, essays, poems, or other texts they are making noises with their mouths, but often they *experience* themselves *mentally* as *writing*. As they speak their words, they experience *written sentences* or *written lines of a poem* in their minds. They think about where the sentences begin and end--sometimes they speak the punctuation aloud (one of the options with voice activated software). Should we say to Milton, "Face it, John, your experience in creating *Paradise Lost* was wholly one of talking"? Can we imagine that Milton let his daughter decide where to end his lines and how to punctuate? This fits my experience too. I've sometimes *written* by dictating into a tape recorder or into my computer using voice-activated software as I've just described--*feeling* my words as written sentences, sometimes *seeing* them in my head--even saying my punctuation aloud. I've been *mentally writing*.

But this isn't the whole story. *Sometimes* as I engaged in this somewhat careful mental writing, I got frustrated and tangled up trying to speak "sentences"--written words. Sometimes I just gave up and said to myself, "The heck with this. I'm just going to *talk*." I just "let go." I stopped trying to "write"; I stopped thinking of my words as part of a sentence. This gave me a completely different mental experience of using language. When I had been trying to dictate writing, I often had to pause and decide on the right word. But when I let myself dictate by just talking and I got going in the process, I no longer had to pause or choose my words. They just *came*--out of my mental sense of having something I wanted to say. In fact I often stopped putting any attention whatever on the words coming out of my mouth *as words*; I just felt myself uttering *thoughts* or *meanings*. This different process produced observably different language: words that looked much more like casual speech.

In short, if we want an adequate understanding of how people use their mouths and hands for language (and if we want to understand borderline cases like dictation), we need to distinguish the *inner mental* process from the *outer physical* process. This distinction has been made by a distinguished Australian linguist, M. A. K. Halliday. When he discusses the obvious differences between casual speech and careful writing, what interests him are the inner, mental differences that usually go along with those two language uses. He uses the words "natural," "un-self-monitored," "flowing," and "spontaneous" to describe the mental process we tend to use when we speak words in casual safe conversation and we're not trying to choose or monitor our words, doing so in real time without pausing or worrying. And he uses the terms "self-monitoring" and "self-conscious" to describe the more careful, deliberating, "choosing"

mental process we tend to use for writing:  we can stop as long as we want--ponder and change our mind--before deciding on a word or phrase or even a whole structure (66, 79).

By paying special attention to the mental dimension of how we produce language, he shows that the mental and physical dimensions don't have to match each other.  That is, as we speak with our mouths, we sometimes use the mental process that he labels "writing": we *plan* or *self-monitor* or *rehearse* our language (as in a job interview).  And as we write with our fingers, we sometimes use the mental process that he labels "speech":  we put down words in an unplanned or unselfmonitored or spontaneous way (as in some emailing, diary writing, and freewriting).

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Halliday goes so far in his terminology (somewhat confusingly) that he lets the mental dimension trump the physical dimension.  That is, he uses the term "spoken language" for *all* the language we produce with our mental process of spontaneous language production--and "written language" for *all* the language we produce with our mental process of self-monitored language production:

> Speech and writing as forms of discourse are typically associated with the two modal points on the continuum from most spontaneous to most self-monitored language:  spontaneous discourse is usually spoken, [while] self-monitored discourse is usually written.  We can therefore conveniently label these two modal points "spoken" and "written" language." ("Spoken" 69, my emphasis)

But having identified spoken and written language with *mentality*, he carefully acknowledges that the physical dimension can differ from the mental one:

> [T]here are self-conscious modes of speech, whose output resembles what we think of as written language, and there are relatively spontaneous kinds of writing;  spoken and written discourse are the outward forms that are typically associated with the critical variable, which is that of consciousness. ("Spoken" ["variation?"] 66, my emphasis)

Oesterreicher, too, spends a good deal of time on this crucial distinction between the mental and the physical:  the "conceptual [mental] aspect of language must be strictly distinguished from the medium aspect of language" (191).  He cites various other linguists who "all insist that the *conceptional* profiles of any discourse are, as a matter of principle, independent of the *medium of discourse*" (191 my emphasis).

> Similar distinctions are made by M.A.K. Halliday, Wallace Chafe, Elinor Ochs, Deborah Tannen, and other scholars.  They use--more or less systematically--the terms spoken versus written to mark the medium-opposition, and terms like oral versus literate, informal versus formal, or unplanned versus planned to denote aspects of the linguistic [and mental] conception.  In addition, Basil Bernstein's distinction between restricted and elaborated code reflects differences in linguistic conception too. (Oesterreicher 191-92)

French linguists have *separate* terms for the mental and physical dimensions of language.  They distinguish the two different *mental* processes as *langue parlee* versus *langue ecrite*;  and they distinguish the two physical forms of language as *code phonique* vs. *code grahique*.

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The dimension of *time* has a crucial effect on our mentality in producing language.  In ordinary writing, we can take all the time we want to plan and monitor our words:  we can ponder, write, and cross out, ponder, and rewrite.  The current metaphor for this seems to be that we are operating "off line."  In ordinary conversation on the other hand, we don't usually have much time for pausing and planning and changing our minds about which word to use.  But occasionally we engage in mental writing as we speak;  we do lots of pausing and take all the time we need to choose our spoken words consciously and carefully--sometimes choosing one and rejecting it and using another.  By the same token, we sometimes engage in mental speaking as we write, so we use our fingers as put out visible words without pausing--not planning or correcting or searching for options but rather settling for whatever words offer themselves.

If it seems odd or unrealistic to talk about a *mental* language use that differs from a *physical* language use, I would insist that we see the difference every day in something quite ordinary: "talking" inside our head. Most people comfortably recognize that they speak *mentally* inside their head while *physically* saying nothing. (I do plenty of writing inside my head too, but it's always accompanied by inner speech. When I ask acquaintances if they write inside their heads without inner speech, few say they do, but perhaps my sample is small.)

Some might object that inner speaking is not "normal" speaking because it's monologue rather than dialogue. But spoken monologue is a common human activity too--as in telling stories to friends, giving directions, explaining complex procedures, teaching classes, lecturing, or allowing ourselves to be interviewed. For such monologues, there's usually a present audience--either face to face or on the phone. But there's an interesting form of spoken monologue with *no* live audience that's becoming more and more common in our culture: the phone message. Phone messages provide a good illustration of how language use changes with time and culture. At first we had no history or genre of phone messages, and most of us were flustered when we had to leave one. "What am I doing?--writing a note or saying something to someone?" (I often find myself ending a phone message with, "Bye bye, this is Peter"--as though I were signing my name at the bottom of a letter.) But now people are becoming adept, and phone messages are beginning to be treated as a genre and even an art from. (See Greenberg for a published collection of phone messages.)

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And plenty of our inner speaking is strongly dialogic because it's directly addressed to an audience that we supply--real or imagined. I love the French phrase, *l'esprit de l'escalier*, that refers to the common experience of leaving a party or a meeting and walking down the stairs (l'escalier) and suddenly finding in our minds exactly the brilliant or witty (l'esprit) remark we *should* have made but didn't. As we speak inside our heads, we see how brilliant we would have been. We hear the lame or flustered reply that the other person would have given. Similarly, when we know we'll have to say something difficult or awkward in a face to face encounter, we sometimes rehearse words in our heads--often imagining a full dialogue that includes the other person's words. No sounds, yet we hear sounds in our heads. During this inner speaking, people sometimes even form silent words with their mouths (I'm often startled to find my lips doing this).

Of course plenty of our inner speech is purely to ourselves. We try to figure out what to do next or we find we need to describe for ourselves something that happened. Troublesome events sometimes lead us to tell  them to ourselves over and over. This kind of talk can merge with or transform itself into inner thinking. Vygotsky charts the developmental route in children from outer speech to inner speech to thinking. He and others have good examples of children talking to themselves as they try to solve problems.

Some language-happy theorists claim that *all* thinking is in words. Most people don't see it this way and the common experience of artists and musicians (and the behavior of animals!) seems a sufficient rebuttal to such an unlikely idea. We can trust the common sense view: sometimes we think with internal speech, sometimes without (no sounds, no mouth movements), and sometimes even without language. (See Pinker [*Stuff of Thought?*] for strong arguments against the peculiarly narrow view that all thinking is in language.]

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In future references to these two mental processes of generating language, I will often allow myself some metaphors--imprecise of course, but helpful. I like to say that we have a choice between two mental *gears*: a "mental speaking gear" and a "mental writing gear"--and we can use either gear whether we are physically speaking or writing. For example, in a job interview, we might start out comfortably chit-chatting in our speaking gear. But then the interviewer says, "Now tell me why you consider yourself qualified for this job." Suddenly we start to plan and

choose and monitor our spoken words with conscious care.  Suddenly we are using our writing gear for speaking.

Conversely, when we are writing with our fingers, we can stop planning and choosing words with care and start to let words roll out unplanned or unmonitored, sometimes almost of their own accord--without having to work at choosing them--just as spontaneously and uncarefully as we often do in safe conversation.  This is the process I'll focus on in the next chapter--about freewriting.  Freewriting exercises are designed, among other things, to help us learn to produce written language in this way--to bump ourselves into the mental speaking gear as we write.  It's not that freewriting yields strings of language that are *exactly* the same as what we produce in spontaneous conversation.  But it harnesses the essential *resource* of speech I'm interested in here: unplanned words.

There's another metaphorical contrast that I find very helpful:  *uttering* language versus *constructing* or *composing* language.  The word "utter" helps imply the mouth-based nonplanning spontaneous process we so often use in comfortable speaking.  The words "construct" and "compose" imply the more careful hand-based mental process most people use when they are trying to find the exact word or phrase for their meaning and working to make the grammar fit the rules they're supposed to follow for writing.  I often use this metaphor when I'm responding to student writing.  I point to sentences that are particularly tangled and clogged and say something like this:

> I found this sentence was difficult and unpleasant to read.  Notice how *"constructed"* it is. You would never *utter* a sentence like this.  I sensed that as you were writing it, you paused or interrupted yourself quite often to ponder which words or phrases to use--or how the grammar ought to go.  You *chose* words, but they didn't follow the kind of comfortable clear sequence that is natural to your mouth .  You haven't broken any grammar rules, but your words don't hang together for a reader.  Try *uttering* your thought, and your sentences will be much clearer and more inviting for readers.

## The Continuum Between Mental Speaking and Writing

My "gear" metaphor implies a binary, either/or choice between mental speaking and writing. This fits the physical realm where we're pretty much stuck with a binary choice between mouth and the fingers.  But in the mental realm, we have a full spectrum or continuum between our inner writing gear and our inner speaking gear--between full spontaneity and full planning.  Whether we are physically speaking or writing, we spend a lot of time at intermediate points--partly planning and partly blurting.  Our choice among mental "gears" is not digital but analogue.  As Halliday puts it, "[mental] speaking" and "[mental] writing" are "modal points on a continuum."   We sometimes sort-of monitor or "watch our language" but still go fast without much pausing or planning.  Similarly, the metaphor of *utter* vs. *construct* also implies misleadingly a binary choice--where, again, there is a full continuum.

Still, activity along busy a gamut does not deny the reality of the terminal points at each extreme.  Virtually all of us have experienced extreme mental speaking during moments of intense conversation--and extreme mental writing during moments of agonizingly deliberative writing. But in addition, most of us have done some *mental speaking while writing* at times of heated "inspired" writing--and done some *mental writing while speaking* at times of tortured speaking.  The binary *mental* difference is helpful to notice.

For instance, in my dictating experience, I felt an abrupt change of mental gears from constructing to uttering when I stopped trying mentally to "write." Suddenly I could stop thinking about words and let my mind focus on meanings or feelings and the words took care of themselves. I stopped being conscious of what a sentence was--where it started and ended and how to punctuate it. As a result, I could find more words without struggle. I wasn't "constructing" or "composing" syntax, I was "uttering" syntax. It might even be truer to my experience to say that didn't so much decide to *engage* my speech gear as *disengage* my writing gear. It was my writing gear that was distracting me and inhibiting language--even inhibiting thinking. The same thing happens in writing when I'm struggling to choose my words and the process gets slower and more frustrating. Suddenly I remember I can just freewrite, and so I start blurting my way through my perplexities.

## Summing Up the Definitions

In the Introduction to Part One, I showed that there is no clear dividing line between spoken and written language when linguists look at huge corpuses of human discourse. Thus, most of us are capable of some flexibility. We can easily relax and produce informal spontaneous conversational speech in whatever vernacular we use--and of course this is typical for informal chatting. But in certain circumstances we can "watch our tongue" and choose our words with care: perhaps we're in a tricky argument with someone who has power over us--or in a job interview.

Now in this Introduction to Part Two, I've shown where we get this flexibility: from the *mental* realm. We can engage in "*mental* speaking" and produce unplanned language--whether we use our mouths or our fingers; and we can engage in "*mental writing*"--and produce carefully monitored language--whether we use our mouths or our fingers. We have linguistic choices in our heads that need not be governed by the physical mode of producing language.

The theme of the book is *choice*. There's almost nothing we can't do with our fingers and our mouths and our minds. I'm fighting against too much material determinism: I want to push against the limits of our physical and mental capacities for speaking and writing. And I'm fighting too much cultural determinism--in particular about writing: let's not be restricted by how our culture (or any culture) uses writing.

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## Chapter 7

## Freewriting: A Reliable Way of Learning to Speak onto the Page

Ken Macrorie was the first to bring what he called "free writing" to the attention of the field of composition. He was one of the first main figures in the brand new field of composition in the 1960s and the first editor [yes?] of our main journal, *College Composition and Communication*. But he has always been at pains to insist that he didn't invent it. He points to a 1936 essay by William Carlos Williams, "How to Write," that has this key passage:

One takes a piece of paper, anything, the flat of a shingle, slate, cardboard and with anything handy to the purpose begins to put down the words after the desired expression in mind. This is the anarchical phase of writing. . . . Write, write anything: it is all in all probability worthless anyhow, it is never hard to destroy written characters. But it is absolutely essential to the writing of anything worth while that the mind be fluid and release itself to the task.

Forget all rules, forget all restrictions, as to taste, as to what ought to be said, write for the pleasure of it--whether slowly or fast--every form of resistance to a complete release should be abandoned. . . .

[Critical, conscious attention to words] is dealt with in the colleges and in all forms of teaching but nowhere does it seem to be realized that without its spring from the deeper strata of the personality, all the teaching and learning in the world can make nothing of the result. . . . I am not speaking of two persons, a poet and critic, I am speaking of the same person, the writer. He has written with his deepest mind, now the object is there and he is attacking it with his most recent mind, the fore-brain, the seat of memory and ratiocination, the so-called intelligence. (quoted on pp 171-72 of Belanoff, Elbow, and Macrorie. But see Williams "How")

Macrorie also gives credit to Dorothea Brand (writing in the 1930s) and to S. I. Hayakawa. The latter became a right wing U.S. Senator from California, but he started out interested in language and General Semantics and wrote a book I remember as interesting when I was starting out: *Language in Thought and Action*. In his 1962 essay in *College Composition and Communication*, he wrote these striking words:

How, then, shall writing be taught? I am just about coming to the conclusion that it should not be taught at all. I believe that instruction in grammar, spelling, sentence structure, paragraphing and such should be abandoned in Freshman English. The students should be told that the lid is off, that they can write and spell and punctuate any damn way they please--but that they must write daily and copiously.

A favorite exercise of mine (the idea comes from Paul Eluard and the surrealist poets) is to give students a specified period--say fifteen or twenty minutes--and tell them to write rapidly and continuously for that length of time, without pausing, without taking thought, without revising, without taking pen from paper. If the student runs out of things to say, he is to write the last words he wrote over and over again over and over again over and over again until he can find other things to say. (Quoted in Macrorie "Relationship" 177, but see Hayakawa for his essay--where the passage is on p 8)

Williams and Hayakawa didn't call it free writing and they didn't see it as a way to enlist speech for writing. (But note his comment later on: "in a matter of weeks, student writings, at first so labored and self-conscious, become fluid, expressive, and resonant with the rhythms of the spoken American language (8)". Macrorie, too, when he praises a piece of freewriting by saying "here is a real girl speaking"--"an individual person seems to be speaking" (10).

And as Hayakawa indicates, they more or less stole the activity of "automatic writing" from surrealists and dada-ists. Yeats famously got his wife to write automatically while in a trance. (See Boice and Meyers, "Two Parallel Traditions: Automatic Writing and Freewriting.")

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How can we get into our early writing all those virtues of speaking that I described in Chapters 3, 4, and 5?  Obviously freewriting--and "speaking onto the page"--are the answers I propose.  But what do those terms really mean and how do we learn to harness the activities?

What they don't mean is a *different kind* of speaking onto the page that has long been advised--something very different from freewriting.  When Aristotle said that good rhetoric and writing should hide its art and look natural and easy, he seemed to be implying that it should *look like* easy unplanned speaking--speaking "without art."  Hazlitt is more explicit about how good writing should resemble speech.  Here are oft quoted words from his "On Familiar Style":

> It is not easy to write a familiar style. Many people mistake a familiar for a vulgar style, and suppose that to write without affectation is to write at random. On the contrary, there is nothing that requires more precision, and, if I may so say, purity of expression, than the style I am speaking of. It utterly rejects not only all unmeaning pomp, but all low, cant phrases, and loose, unconnected, slipshod allusions.  It is not to take the first word that offers, but the best word in common use; it is not to throw words together in any combinations we please, but to follow and avail ourselves of the true idiom of the language. To write a genuine familiar or truly English style, is to write as any one would speak in common conversation who had a thorough command and choice of words, or who could discourse with ease, force, and perspicuity, setting aside all pedantic and oratorical flourishes. . . .

Aristotle and Hazlitt weren't praising careless unplanned speech as I am.  They were saying that it takes art, judgment, and labor to create language that *looks like* the best of speaking--to create the effect of no art.

Many good writers have followed their advice:  they compose slowly and carefully *with the tongue*.  In effect they are engaged in *very slow speaking*--building and testing every sentence in the mouth and ear--as though it were speech--and not putting on paper or on the screen till it *feels and sounds* like the best of speech.  That is indeed a powerful way to get the virtues of speech for writing.  It's a deliberate method of choosing every word with care, but it's a method that causes many people to bog down and then put off writing whenever they can.  (When I turn to the late revising process In Part Three, I'll show a process for using the untutored tongue with deliberation and conscious judgment--a process that seeks exactly what Aristotle and Hazlitt sought.)

But slow careful speaking doesn't get us the primal virtue of speaking that I seek for the early stages of writing:  *ease*!  For exploratory and early draft writing, I'm celebrating a noncareful nondeliberate kind of speaking onto the page--indeed it's careless.  It exploits the miraculous linguistic ability we use every day in casual talking:  the mental ability to find words without trying, without looking for them, without planning--all the while *physically* moving our fingers.

Plenty of people use this ability to write in diaries or in chat rooms or on email.  But many of them find it hard to exploit the ease of unplanned speaking when they are trying to write something serious that demands a lot of thought.  If you ask them about their topic, they can usually speak lots of thoughts and words.  But they don't feel they can do the same thing on paper.  They feel they have to get their thoughts right and put them in the proper words.

Freewriting is an easy reliable way to learn unplanned speaking onto the page, even when the topic is thorny.  What's important is how it teaches us to use unplanned speaking as a disciplined practice for *part* of the writing process, not a way to produce a final draft.  That is, if we

want all those benefits of unplanned speech, we need to be willing to make a mess--indeed to write garbage.  So we need to recognize that unplanned speaking onto the page is only a part of the writing process.  We have to learn in revising to get rid of the mess without getting rid of the virtues tangled up in it.

We probably see lots of unplanned speaking onto the page all around us--for example in blurted emails and vented diary entries.  But in fact it's virtually impossible to tell from looking at words on the page how they were generated:  were they unplanned blurting or slowly and carefully chosen, perhaps even much revised.  You can't tell the process from the product.  Think of novelists and playwrights struggling hard and revising again and again to write words that look like mere bubbling over.  In the next chapter I'll look at some other sites where we are likely to find unplanned language, but in this chapter I'll focus on freewriting, because we can only be sure that written language was unplanned if we know how it was produced.

Ken Macrorie introduced freewriting to teachers of writing in 1968 (*Writing to Be Read*).  He wanted to help students stop writing stale, stilted, dead language--what he called "Engfish."  He prescribed a ten minute exercise of nonstop writing where you just put down the words that come to you, not trying for good or correct writing.  He wasn't thinking about speaking onto the page or about using the speaking gear for writing.  And neither was I for the three decades I spent celebrating freewriting and exploring its possibilities.  Then one day not so long ago when I was freewriting my way out of a tangle, I startled myself with a new thought:  "I'm not just *writing*, I'm *speaking* onto the page."  This realization opened up a new way to see freewriting--*hear* freewriting--and at the same time it also opened up a new way to think about the very nature of speaking and writing.  This moment was the germ for the present book.

Freewriting is a simple crude artificial writing exercise, classically ten minutes by the clock.  The goal has always been to make the process of writing easier and more comfortable while also bringing out livelier and more natural language.  In a moment I'll provide a couple of samples to show what unplanned language can look like, but first I need to say more about how freewriting is produced.  The terms are simple:

- Write without stopping.  If you feel *nothing* in mind--or if you don't want to write what comes to mind--you can just describe your shoes or write something over and over ("nothing nothing nothing" or "I hate this I hate this" or "shit shit shit").  But no stopping doesn't mean rushing.  It's fine to relax your muscles, to pause very briefly now and then, and to breathe slowly and let a feeling deepen.  The goal is not some kind of pure mental nakedness or perfect free association;  the goal is the easy nonplanning of language and--gradually--easy movement of thinking.

- It's private.  You *can* decide tomorrow or next week to share what you write today, but it's best to write with the expectation of *not* sharing.

- Don't worry about any standards for writing.  Freely accept garbage or meaninglessness.

    There are two useful variations on normal freewriting:

- *Focused freewriting.*  Try to stay on one topic.  When you wander off, just pull yourself back.  This can help you get going and produce lots of words and thoughts for a writing project.  Also, many teachers improve class discussions by giving students five minutes of private focused freewriting on a topic or a question before inviting discussion.  Students invariably have much more to say after they've blurted their first thoughts privately on paper.

• *Public freewriting*.  Write with the expectation of sharing.  This makes freewriting less safe, so you might let yourself make *brief* stops and cross-outs and engage in a *bit* more conscious planning.  Public freewriting works best if there is already some trust in the group--or considerable courage.  And when it comes to sharing, you can always "pass."  ("Marriage Encounter" groups make good use of something close to public freewriting:  couples do more-or-less freewriting and then share the results.  This practice calls on the central principle of Outward Bound:  growth often follows from deliberately imposed risk.  But using risk this way involves some danger and it takes good direction or supervision.)

Freewriting almost invariably forces people to speak onto the page.  By requiring us to put out language nonstop, it pushes most of us into our mental speaking gear where we don't plan or rehearse words before uttering them.  In short, it forcibly severs the connection between physical writing and mental writing--between the use of the fingers and the use of care planning.  (Of course even in fast writing--even in fast talking--*some* people can do *some* planning and choosing.  It's a matter of degree.  Still, freewriting pops almost everyone into a way of generating language that they experiences as quite different from the more careful way they tend to plan and monitor what they write.)

## What Does Freewriting Look Like?

Here is a piece of freewriting (about freewriting, it turns out) from a colleague, Janet Bean.  It's not a freewriting exercise;  it shows how an experienced freewriter uses the process for exploring ideas and looking for more.  I like to say that freewriting exercises help us develop a "freewriting muscle" that we can use whenever we want to relinquish care and explore and get a lot down. Her audience is partly herself, but as you see, it's public freewriting directed at me. (This freewrite became the germ of an article we published--see Bean and Elbow.)

> . . . why am I so drawn to this idea of free speech/free writing?  I think because I have the feeling that free speech actually WORKS as a widely held concept, but people really don't believe in free writing.  We may do a little, undisciplined freewriting in our classrooms, but in the end, it's really all about standardizing language.  That's what's school's about.

> We must recognize that it's not enough to stand up in front of a classroom and say "freewrite," expecting that this will somehow create an environment that is "free."  I think we have to talk about the politics of standardization, about dialect and value, about the relativity of correctness.  (you might disagree with me here.  I think it's possible, perhaps, to do this through showing—not so explicitly.  By having students read diverse, hybrid texts.  By valuing students language in the classroom.  I would still argue that you'd be doing political work by action.  With Af-Am students, though, what has worked for me is the explicit—along with the action.)

> freewriting is transgressive, by its very nature.

> we need to free writing (like those posters, FREE MANDELA, FREE THE WHALES)—free writing from the racist and classist practices of educational institutions. ha.  no small order, there.  But I do believe it.  We have to stop believing in a pure standard English.  Monocultural language practices.  I see my main purpose as a teacher in this learning community for Af.Am. students is to show them that they can draw on Black

rhetorical and intellectual traditions. That to be a writer and thinker is to embrace their identity as African Americans.

Freewriting is in many ways the antithesis of "schooled" writing. Yet it helps make good academic writing possible, I think, in the way it makes connections. I'm leaning toward seeing freewriting as a hybrid—that's my goal. I'm guessing that you might disagree with me here—that you like the idea of getting as much speech as possible on the page?

This is not naive blurting. The writer is obviously an academic thinking about issues she's long pondered. But I think we can see how the process helped her explore--and in addition how her language benefited from many of the lively virtues of speech that I described in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

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Here's what she said about how she wrote it when I asked her afterwards:

> I wrote it straight through, right on the computer, with pauses to think, but no recursivity in terms of, say, going back to the first paragraph and adding or deleting. I was definitely writing it to you, but in a particular way. I think what I do when I'm writing freely like this is invoke the kind of intimate communication style of conversation. So the idea of audience is important, as is the context of friendship. I'm thinking of your response, as when I say, you might disagree with me here. It does have an auditory feel for me, but not so much "speaking on the page" but "speaking to you on the page." But even as I say that, I can see that some of the way I'm using sentence fragments is more like I'm writing to myself. (Email correspondence)

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Let's look now at two pieces of freewriting by first year college students in a classroom setting. By looking at less experienced writers, I think I can show even better how freewriting brings spoken virtues to the page. First, a plain example of ordinary no-assigned-topic freewriting. The teacher began every class with a ten minute exercise--in effect, "Write whatever comes to mind or whatever you need to write about; don't stop." As Richard Haswell and Pat Belanoff both note ( ), students who are new to freewriting often stay fairly close to the conventions of ordinary writing until they gradually learn to exploit the freedom:

> Mark called me this morning at 8:00. I couldn't believe it. When Charlene came and knocked on the door and said it was for me. I knew it had to be him. He called me last night at 11, but I wasn't in. I was at the reading Room ironically writing about him. I got back at 11:25. We talked about school and stuff, but something is wrong. Ever since Terry and I talked about Mark and I, I've been having crazy feelings about do I really love him or not? I do, I say, but is it really real. Damn, I guess this is normal, but I don't want to even think this way. Maybe since I'm not close to him these thoughts run around my mind. I don't know, it's so hard, Sometimes I even think that I'm with him just because hes good to me. Is that being selfish or is it the way I'm supposed to feel? (8)

(Here's how the teacher-researcher, Sheryl Fontaine, was able to publish something that was written as private. She didn't reveal her research interest to the students till after she'd had the same group for two semesters. At the very end, having established lots of trust, she asked her students if they would give her examples of their private freewrites. Most of them gave her most of their freewrites. For her essay and other interesting explorations of the topic, see the volume edited by Belanoff, Elbow, and Fontaine.)

Here's a sample of focused freewriting.  Students were given a standard essay prompt and told to use freewriting for generating ideas.

> OK Why do I really think that the governt should limit the amount of violence on TV?  I think it is obvious.  Just turn on your TV and you see the most awful, violent, sick really stuff. Crazed lunatic captures young child in mall and threatens to do awful things, or stalker threatens to rape woman.  Police everywhere, guns going off this is crazy.  I just don't think this is everyday stuff.  Sure somewhere things like this go on, but I've never seen a high speed chase or even a gun going off other than for hunting.  It seems like TV glorifies violence or maybe rubs there face in it like it was a cow pie smelly and foul.  ok keep writing keep writing.  I don't know who watches this stuff.  Yes I do.  My dad does and I've been caught too.  They have lots of action and suspense that they draw you into them.  It's like there's some magnetic force.  Don't these shows manipulate us, show us things that are so violent so strange so fearful that we have to look.  But how does that affect us to look?  For us as adults I think it needlessly puts us through a bad experience. The big losers are kids.  Here's my strongest point.  They are so impressionable that they don't know the difference between right and wrong.  I've seen kids after watching the ninja turtles come out kicking and fighting like that's ok.  Violence in the cause of right. Yuck.  the the the  the Also young kids can't tell the difference between fantasy and reality.  Like that kid that set fire to his home after seeing it done on bvis and but head. Boy I bet his parents were upset.  We obviously have an epidemic of teen violence now already. Where is it coming from?  I think TV has got to be a contributing factor.   (4Cs 09)

Like many freewrites--careless by definition--these pieces of writing are not impressive.  Up till now, I and others who praised the benefits of freewriting have tended to fall back on words like "clear," "lively," "energetic," and "having a voice"--especially in comparison with so much of the stiff and sometimes muddy writing by so many ordinary students, professionals, and others.  But now, on the basis of the linguistic analysis I did in Chapters 3, 4, and 5, I can show more clearly where the linguistic "life" of freewriting tends to come from and how it effortlessly brings some of the virtues of unplanned spoken language.

• Intonation units.  Because the language of freewriting is unplanned--as in speaking--it falls naturally into strong clear intonational phrases.  (*"ha.  no small order, there.  But I do believe it." "crazy feelings about do I really love him or not?  I do, I say, but is it really real.  Damn, I guess this is normal, but I don't want to even think this way."  "Police everywhere, guns going off this is crazy.  I just don't think this is everyday stuff."*)  This is why you can so often "hear" the intonation in freewriting.  This kind of intonation tends to *carry* meaning and make comprehension effortless.

• Coherence.  Less messiness.  These freewrites illustrate Halliday's startling claim that speech is more coherent than most writing.  Like speech, these freewrites have many fewer crossouts and false starts than we see in the texts of writers who have time to pause, change their mind, and revise.  And for the same (spoken) reason, freewriters instinctively tend to make easy to follow transition from one sentence to the next.  Even when one sentence is jammed up against another one that says the opposite ("I don't know who watches this stuff.  Yes I do."), this logical gap functions as a remarkably "coherent" transition.  Both syntax and logic are transparent.

• Parataxis.  This is a potent source of *energy* in language:  jamming clauses and thoughts up against each other without articulating how they relate.  "I don't know who watches this stuff.  Yes

I do." Consider the comparative limpness of a "properly written" version: "Very few people watch this kind of TV, however I have to admit that I sometimes do." The fact is that the opposite form--hypotaxis or syntactic embedding or hierarchy--often *sap* energy. Another example: "The big losers are kids. Here's my strongest point. They are so impressionable . . . ." The young woman writing about Mark doesn't have time to give hierarchical logic to her conflicting feelings and falls into repeated paratactic contradiction: "I've been having crazy feelings about do I really love him or not? I do, I say, but is it really real. Damn, I guess this is normal, but I don't want to even think this way. . . . I don't know, it's so hard, Sometimes I even think that I'm with him just because hes good to me. Is that being selfish or is it the way I'm supposed to feel?" (The sentence I cut from this quote represents the kind of simple, clear hypotaxis we find in speech: "Maybe since I'm not close to him these thoughts run around my mind.")

• Flexibility of syntax. The second writer more than the first one exploits some of the flexibility of typical speech--break-offs and sudden swerves. But even though the prose by the first writer looks at first very "simple," in fact it is far from the Dick-and-Jane simple repetitive syntax that students so often fall into when they write timidly and fear mistakes. You will have noted her comfortable spoken flexibility in the passage I just quoted.

• Avoiding the clogging effects of left branching syntax and over nominalization. These benefits come naturally from the lack of time for planning. Right branching and verbs rather than nouns: these help explain why freewriting tends to be easy to understand. (Academic or professional writers who are used to thinking in highly nominalized abstract even jargon-ridden language will of course produce freewriting with those features, yet the lack of time to plan tends to cut way back on such hindrances.)

• Language that connects with audience. Private freewriting isn't likely to be very audience oriented--and yet look at that second writer's habitual "you." It could be called just a habitual tick, but the habit is to orient one's language to an audience--which he carries over from speech into freewriting.

• Gisting or talking turkey. Freewriting can be digressive and when it's imposed on reluctant students, they sometimes just walk the dog in language. I don't complain about that because it's still doing its work of helping students feel writing as easy. (I sometimes call it "compulsorywriting.") Nevertheless, most freewriting, as here, *does* tend to get around to some blunt summings up. "Do I really love him?" the first writer asks--and then gives blunt answers. The fact that her answers conflict with each other gives them added point and accuracy. "Good writing" is supposed to be consistent and to "have a thesis," and this, paradoxically, can lead to some fudging and lack of thrust. The second writer--even on the fly--gives a quick summary punch: "Here's my strongest point."

• Reality as process. I'll slightly bend Halliday's interesting philosophical claim that spoken language gets truer to reality by representing things as process. I want to point out one of the features of freewriting that I find most precious and helpful for good writing: freewriting tends to enact *thinking in process.* For "good writing" they tell us to "make up your mind," "figure out your point," "have a clear thesis." This is one of the main sources of syntactic and intellectual deadness in so much writing. Freewriting doesn't give us the time to make up our minds, but it gives us the privacy to acknowledge our ambivalence. (As Chaucer says, "The tongue explores the aching tooth.") So even though the conventional argument against freewriting is that it enforces thoughtlessness, as Sheridan Blau argues (below), it actually *invites* thinking that is active and

productive. You don't have time to run away from all the thoughts, feelings, and experiences that contradict the way you like to see things.

I fear that my fascination with freewriting will get in the way for many readers. Before going on to describe two interesting cousins of freewriting, I'll create a long large box for a few short observations about freewriting and an example of my own freewriting.

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• Exercises have an interesting paradoxical relationship to goals. They are "pragmatic" and "useful" and yet they often feel as though they have no goal. For the goal is in the doing. When we practice scales or run wind sprints, the goal is not to make music or get to the other end of the field. The goal is improve our ability to make music and to develop running speed and lung capacity. And sometimes the goal of an exercise is oblique. Simone Weil wrote that struggling over mathematics homework *with care* is a good way to get closer to God. A Buddhist sage once famously asked an acolyte to focus full attention on cutting up carrots--as a road towards enlightenment. Those interested in Alexander Technique would say that freewriting is an exercise in *not trying* or *avoiding "end-gaining"*--learning to move or behave *not* toward an end or goal: the goal is going-through-the-motions.

Thus, thinkers and mystics down through the ages have noted the power of *nonchoosing* or *nonplanning* for deeper insight. Teachers of drawing have long used a visual equivalent of freewriting: the sixty second sketch where you must keep on moving your pencil or charcoal and cannot lift it from the paper. Here's another example, applied to the writing of poetry. ----- read us a good poem twice: the first time for just listening; the second time, she asked us simply to write down the words that struck as pleasing or powerful. Then she gave us only three minutes to write a poem of our own--using all the words we'd written down but on any topic that somehow emerged. The products were often quite successful--even from people who never dared write poetry. As --- said, the problem with writing poetry is often that we have too much time.

• By the way, it's crucial for teachers to join in the exercise when they ask students to freewrite. Otherwise students think freewriting is just a "baby" exercise that professionals don't need--or a way for stuck teachers to keeps students busy. In fact, freewriting usually bears the most fruit for experienced writers. When I'm somewhat nervous while leading a class or a workshop or giving a talk and I ask others to freewrite, my freewriting is often incoherent. I can't harness my mind--or rather, that little harbor of safety gives me permission to stop trying to harness it. Here's a tiny stretch of something I wrote under these conditions:

> What's up  what's up  what's up  what's up  what am I doing  hello  hello  hello  how am I doing  I don't know  I don't know  I don't know  nothing  nothing  nothing

By giving this unpromising example of freewriting, I feel less inhibited about voicing my enthusiasm for it.

• When I want people to think about the effect of audience awareness in writing, I ask for a private freewrite and then a public one. The contrast helps most people realize how much their normal writing is permeated by some anxiety about readers. It helps them realize that they aren't taking enough advantage of the inherent privacy of any early draft piece of writing.

• There are a few people whose freewriting doesn't seem very related to speaking. They write without stopping or planning, but they seem to use a more *conceptual* gear than a speaking gear. They just list words or phrases and don't use syntax to connect those words and phrases. They make a kind of generative list. And often there's little sense of voice or any sound in the language they produce. I think people often learn this kind of freewriting from a different valuable exercise that teachers often use: *word-webbing* or *conceptual mapping*: throw down as many words and phrases about a topic as you can without stopping to think things through.

Here is an example of my freewriting. I was leading a workshop for exploring the concept of voice in writing and I asked everyone to try to explore as many as possible of all the voices they used in their talking. I made a kind of list:

> My whining voice. [I had used that voice as an example when I introduced the exercise. How, in growing up, my parents *hated* whining, and how I've always noticed with a kind of revulsion when I heard myself whine--but also gradually acknowledged that there was a lot of whining in there if I were willing to take the cork out of the bottle.]

> I'm sensing the possibility of a serene voice. Calm. Not frantic.

(I should look again at Harvey Jackins' voice.  Maybe I'm selling it short.

Reading Mary Rose [O'Reilly];   trying to stop being frantic.  The voice I felt this afternoon lying down on the bench.

My reasonable published voice.  I'm not an obsessive, I'm not arguing, I'm tolerant and open to all  points of view.  I embrace all.  [For me as audience, I didn't need the smiley emoticon]

My published arguing voice.  Dogged.  A bulldog with teeth in the flesh.  I'll never give up.  I don't raise my voice or scream or hector, but I fight, fight, fight.  Bulldozer.  I think of more and more voices.

-occasionally I'll let in a zinger--half under wraps.

I love zingers that are subtle.

Irony; british; urbanity.  Evelyn Waught;  E M Forster;  Williams.  I love the unstated, the implied.  I put things in a lot of my essays that I think most people in comp won't get.  Only sophisticated literary types--who like comp--will get them.

Blind anger -- the flash before my eyes

the loving voice{--fatherly and avuncular    --    control/power

{--more mutual     --   no control -- relinquishing power

The capitulating voice--letting myself be overwhelmed in the danger.  Apologizing for what I did wrong.  Relinquishing

[I went on then to an extended freewrite about this relinquishing voice and its role for me in marriage]

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## Two Cousins of Freewriting: Inkshedding and Invisible Writing

*Inkshedding: An Application of Freewriting that Foregrounds Speech*

It took me many years to see the connection between freewriting and speech, but two brilliant Canadian teachers of writing saw it immediately.  Jim Reither and Russ Hunt started with a wild experiment whose explicit purpose was to hi-jack for writing some of the advantages of speech.  They taught an entire writing course--from the opening class to the last one--during which everyone was forbidden to speak a word.  All transactions had to be in writing.  "Please open your books to page fifty-seven."  Such words were never spoken or heard;  they had to be written on the board or put on a handout (and this was before xerox machines).  "Which book?"  "I missed last class because I was sick."  Students couldn't say these words--only write them on little notes (as though they were deaf).  Reither and Hunt were consciously trying to heighten the social and dialogic dimension of writing.  They were rubbing students' noses in a conception of writing that was new to most of them:  writing isn't just a one-way document that goes from the student and stops with a teacher who grades it--and where the whole purpose of writing is in order to be judged.  Long before computers were used for writing, this had an effect we now see in email and on-line courses:  it de-fanged the act of writing and made into a no-big-deal medium of communication between humans.

This led them to specify a kind of writing that they called *inkshedding*, borrowing the term from seventeenth century slang (but generously noting their debt to freewriting).  Inkshedding is focused and public freewriting for academic purposes.  Hunt writes:

Briefly, it entails informal or impromptu writing that is immediately read and used and responded to by others, and then discarded.  A typical inkshedding situation might occur as a response to a conference paper--the audience might immediately

> write for a few minutes, then read a half-dozen other participants' [inksheds], and then move to oral discussion based on the reading. The writing might then be thrown away." (249)

They were consciously and explicitly developing a hybrid between speech and writing--developing the ability to speak onto the page, though I don't see them using that phrase. Reither and Hunt figured out how *speech* evades many of the problems of writing--problems that come from its permanence and cultural weight (especially in the classroom). In speaking, we generate language and thoughts for an audience, but we throw away the words after they have done their work. We let the sound waves dissipate without bothering to save them. Speech as "self-consuming discourse." Hunt and Reither were trying to bottle the advantages of "no big deal" language for writing.

But of course they were preserving some of the advantages of writing. They saw the pragmatic efficiency in writing that are missing in speech. Suppose you are leading a classroom or a meeting and your goal is the obvious one that we often avow: we want everyone to learn as much as possible from the thinking of others. Speech isn't very good for this job. Meetings and discussion classes *can* be excitingly productive--sometimes--but only one person can speak at a time. With inkshedding, everyone writes simultaneously and quickly, and then the texts are passed around the room and everyone reads simultaneously. The process is fast and efficient and it yields the maximum interchange of thoughts in the minimum time. It's not designed to preclude discussion (though it can--sometimes blessedly); it's an ideal prelude to oral discussion.

Nowadays we can get the same effect with networked computers or chat rooms, but this technology is not so common in the rooms where we have our meetings or conference sessions. (And Reither and Hunt developed inkshedding way before any of that technology.) Since 1984 the annual conferences of Canadian writing teachers (the Association for Study of Language and Learning) have been titled *Inkshed*. I attended *Inkshed 18* in the spring of 2001 and saw inksheds from individual sessions typed up and put on the bulletin boards by the next morning so they could be read by people who had gone to a different session. For an extended definition and history of inkshedding, see <http://www.stthomasu.ca/~hunt/dialogic/inkshed.html>.)

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Inkshedding addresses two difficulties that some people have with freewriting. First, some people feel that the stakes are too low in freewriting: it feels too much like a *mere* exercise--a waste of time. Feeling this way, they can't get themselves to focus much effort or attention when they freewrite and therefore no mental doors open for them. Secondly, interestingly enough, a few people feel that freewriting raises the stakes too *high*. They find privacy *more* threatening, for they experience *themselves* as the most damning reader of all. They find it easier to write for a reader, even a critical reader, than to be left alone with their own words.

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*Invisible Writing: A Version of Freewriting that Foregrounds the Role of Attention*

Many things that seem natural and inevitable are actually artificial--for example, writing itself. But now writing feels natural and inevitable--and with it, the fact that we can *see* what we write. Indeed, in 1975, James Britton and some colleagues did some experiments to confirm their natural assumption that the ability to see what you write "is an indispensable feature of the composing process for all writers and for all but the most cognitively simple writing tasks" (quoted in Blau 284). They used 70's technology for this experiment: they wrote with spent ball point pens and

carbon paper between two sheets of paper. Thus they couldn't see what they wrote, but the words were recorded by the carbon paper. Britton described the experience as completely disruptive: "We just could not hold the thread of an argument or the shape of a poem in our minds, because scanning back was impossible." (quoted in Blau 284).

Britton *et al* were English and perhaps it took a Californian, Sheridan Blau, to foster a completely different experience with invisible writing. He repeated Britton's experiment many times:

> At first to my embarrassment and then to my amazement my students, using empty ballpoint pens and carbon paper, wrote competently and with increasing enthusiasm even as they progressed along an [elaborated] sequence of increasingly difficult writing assignments. (284)

Why did these peculiar conditions help them?

> Several of them reported that the constraints of the invisible writing procedure actually enhanced their fluency and spurred their creativity. The invisibility of the text seemed to force them to give more concentrated and sustained attention to their emerging thoughts than they usually gave when writing. (284-85)

Now computers make invisible writing easy: just turn down your screen.

Invisible writing reveals the interesting fact that writing is not just writing, it's usually *both*-writing-*and*-reading. Invisible writing blocks the reading, and this forces us to engage in *nothing-but-writing*. This turns out to boost concentration and intensity of mind. I sometimes use invisible writing when I find myself flagging on a pragmatic less-than-epic writing task such as writing letters: I am tired or I don't want to write them. When I turn off the screen, I *can't* stop and this makes me quickly get my thoughts down--no matter how unlovely their form. It gets me to complete a rough rough draft very quickly, and I find it's not so hard to clean it up. Invisible writing is a particularly crucial exercise for people whose writing is hobbled because they are too finicky. They spend too much time sitting there, trying to decide, crossing out, and reading back over what they've already written. Not-writing is a powerful trap for unskilled and unconfident writers:

> The fact that unskilled writers in their composing tend to reread (on the average) after every four or five words (Schneider), compared to thirty or forty words for skilled writers (Pianko), suggests that poor writers compose without much of a sense of where they are going, without the kind of tacit or felt sense of an idea that seems to impel the writing of more skilled writers. Unskilled writers seem to compose instead by constantly consulting what they have just said as the basis for what they will say next . . . . (294).

It's easy to see how invisible writing helps brute productivity. We can't dither or we'll lose track of what we are "saying." But Blau goes on to make a more striking claim: that invisible writing helps *thinking*. Sounds wrong--and of course it doesn't help precise and careful thinking, which requires slow pondering. What it helps is *productive* thinking--the ability to come up with lots of ideas and to explore them in creative and fruitful ways. He explains this by noting the role of *attention* in thinking and how attention is a limited resource. (Note how Chafe made the same point: we pause in speaking because we can give full attention to only one bit of meaning at a time.) Blau argues that if we stop attending to the *written words* (and especially if we stop worrying about

issues of correctness), we can give more attention and concentration to our *thinking*--to the incipient *meanings* we are trying to put into words.

> We must not become so numbed by our own educational propaganda about how writing is an instrument for the improvement of thinking (although it is) to forget the irony of the fact that the act of writing is itself one of the principal obstacles to focused, sustained, and insightful thinking for many writers, novice and experienced alike. What invisible writing and freewriting offer us are techniques for overcoming impediments to thinking that are posed most devastatingly for beginning writers but that also challenge most of the rest of us, when faced with the task of producing extended written discourse for a public audience. (289)

(On the crucial but subtle experience of attending to meaning apart from the words, see my "Felt Sense ----")

I've spent most of my career trying to figure out things that help writing, but I've never come up with anything as useful as Ken Macrorie's simple crude exercise of freewriting. To anyone who has read this far, I make the following announcement in a firm tone:

> Do *not* read (or write) any further till you have really tried out freewriting. Too many people, teachers especially, have come to think, "Oh yes, freewriting. I'll tell my weak scared students about it. I might try it in class on the first or second day. No big deal."

> You need to test it out in a disciplined and consistent way--at least dozen times--both as a pure exercise and as a way to generate words, ideas, and even drafts for a serious project. As you gradually learn to exploit it, notice how it forces you to keep writing. What else is more valuable for writers and would-be writers. Notice how it brings you words and thoughts even when you thought you had none--words and thoughts you probably wouldn't have found with careful conscious writing. And notice how, though it doesn't reproduce speech, it harnesses the speaking gear and gives you language with the energy and liveliness of spontaneous speech--language that has many of the virtues I spoke of in Chapters 3, 4, and 5.

[[Here are a couple of things that I don't know whether or where to include:

--I've spent a career trying to think of ways to help writers, but nothing seems to me more valuable and durable for almost all situations as this crudely simple technique that I learned from Ken Macrorie.

--An episode of "NCIS" Law and Order" on TV turned on freewriting. It involved a writer who was blocked and then did lots and lots of freewriting--and a criminal stole the typewriter tapes and committed murders that followed this secret script and thus implicated the writer. In my region, this episode was shown on April 9th, 2009--but I don't know if it was a rerun.]]

--Here's an intriguing minimal claim for freewriting: *I've almost never seen a freewrite I couldn't understand--even if it's full of "ungrammatical" language and unexpected changes of direction and topic. But I've seen* lots *of writing that was carefully composed and revised that was too incoherent to understand.* This points to a deep fact about writing and language: the incoherence that comes from nonplanning is minor compared to the incoherence that comes when careful planning is unskilled--as it so often is. (See essays by Belanoff and Haswell on coherence in freewriting. As writers get more skilled, they seem to exploit better the potentials for productive chaos in freewriting.)

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