



CONTEMPLATIVE WRITING

"Writing is an exploration. You start from nothing and learn as you go."

— E. L. Doctorow

OVERVIEW

This variation on freewriting is a method of inner inquiry, helping students to explore their thoughts, emotions, or ideas on a topic of their choice, an academic-related question, or an ethical dilemma.

PLANNING FOR IT

WHEN YOU MIGHT USE THIS PRACTICE

- To help students examine more deeply their own thoughts, feelings, and ideas around a personal challenge they are facing
- To explore a "big question" within an [academic subject](#)
- To examine different solutions to an ethical dilemma
- As part of a unit that is conducive to asking reflective or personal questions
- To activate the creative process
- To have fun and reduce stress about writing, precision, and perfection
- To help staff explore solutions to a [school challenge](#) or to kick-off a brainstorming process

TIME REQUIRED

- 5-15 minutes

LEVEL

- Upper Elementary
- Middle School
- High School
- College
- Adult

MATERIALS

- Writing materials

LEARNING OBJECTIVE

Students will:

- Examine and gain insight into their own thoughts, emotions, and ideas on a specific topic
- Reflect on the writing process
- Explore their personal “voice” without concern for self- or other-evaluation
- Writing materials

ADDITIONAL SUPPORTS

- [Making Practices Culturally Responsive](#)
- [Adapting Practices for Students with Special Needs](#)
- [Making a Practice Trauma-Informed](#)
- [Making Classrooms and Schools Trauma-Informed and Healing-Centered](#)

SEL COMPETENCIES

- Self-Awareness
- Self-Management
- Responsible Decision-Making

HOW TO DO IT

REFLECTION BEFORE THE PRACTICE

- Practice the method with your own question. Set your intention to write freely and without self-criticism or judgment. Don’t worry about trying to be correct or clever; allow yourself to just see what happens.
- How did this process make you feel afterwards? What insights did you gain through this process?

INSTRUCTIONS

This practice may be used with a prompt related to a topic being studied, an ethical dilemma, or with a question generated by students themselves. The focus is on process, not outcome. Assure students that their writing will not be shared unless they choose to do so. Provide as much personal space as possible for students to have privacy, including writing outdoors (weather permitting).

SET UP THE PRACTICE

- Introduce the practice by telling students:
 - Freewriting is an exercise that can help you observe your emotions, intuitions, or physical responses. It is a method of inner inquiry: you never know what you will learn until you start writing; then you discover truths that you didn't know existed. Free writing can free the writer.
- If possible, have students choose a space where they will not be disturbed.
- Guide students through a [simple breathing practice](#) to clear and focus their minds and cultivate awareness.

WRITING PROMPTS

- If students **choose their own question**, give the following instructions:
 - Write a few lines on anything you would like intuitive guidance on.
 - Focusing on one question ensures optimal clarity. For example:
 - What do I care most about now? (values)
 - Why do I have such difficulty developing healthy eating habits? (health)
 - How can I have a better relationship with my family or a specific person? (relationships)
- You can also provide students with an **open-ended question on a particular academic topic**. For example:
 - History: How might the world be different if the atomic bomb had not been invented?
 - Mathematics: How can math be used to make the world a better place?
 - Computer Science: How can technology be used to enhance people's social and emotional well-being?
 - Literature: Choose your favorite book and consider how you might rewrite the ending.
- Students can also write on an **ethical dilemma** they are facing, or one that their school, community, country, or the world is facing.

CONTEMPLATIVE WRITING

- Give students an idea as to how long they'll be given to write, for example 5 to 15 minutes.
- Before students begin writing, tell them:
 - *Write whatever comes.*
 - ***Don't think and don't judge*** what you are writing.
 - *Do not erase words or correct yourself.*
 - *Don't worry about spelling or grammar errors.*
 - *If you get stuck, start writing, "I feel stuck." Keep your pen moving!*
 - *Keep writing, and don't think about where it is coming from.*
- Have students begin writing.
- Have students stop at an appropriate time for the developmental level of the class (between 5 and 15 minutes).
- When complete, have students read through what they have written **out loud** to themselves, noticing what they feel.

CLOSURE

- Have students reflect on the following questions:
 - Did you allow judgment and evaluation to influence your writing?
 - Were you surprised by what you wrote?
 - How did it make you feel?

ADAPTATIONS

- Instead of stopping the process at a predetermined time, allow students to finish their writing when it comes to a natural conclusion.
- Add the following debrief question: Can you distinguish if you are writing from intuition or your rational mind?

REFLECTION AFTER THE PRACTICE

- Did the students enjoy this practice?
- What is their feedback about any insights they received?
- Do you notice whether students take a different approach to writing afterwards?

THE RESEARCH BEHIND THE PRACTICE

EVIDENCE THAT IT WORKS

Several studies have found that free-writing—or writing without stopping—improves college students' [comprehension of lecture material](#) and increases their [confidence in academic writing](#). One study with 200 mainly Dutch 7th graders found that those who wrote freely about their values experienced more [prosocial feelings](#) such as love and connectedness and exhibited more prosocial behavior over a three-month period than students in a control group.

WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Education is often conducted as an “outside-in” process: the student is an empty vessel to be filled with facts, figures, and ideas that are supported by outside sources. While this method has its place, it ignores a student’s own wisdom and life experience as it relates to the content. As a result, students often leave school not knowing who they are, what they value, and how to approach life’s many dilemmas.

By offering students the opportunity to gain insight into their own thinking, values, and problem-solving abilities, educators are not only helping to deepen students’ learning of content and making it more meaningful, they are also guiding students in the key developmental task of youth: Answering the questions “who do I want to become” and “what strengths can I offer in service of the greater good?”

SOURCE

The Center for Contemplative Mind in Society ([CMind](#)) transforms higher education through contemplative practice. Founded in 1997, we organize conferences, retreats, and the annual [Summer Session on Contemplative Learning in Higher Education](#); we create and identify useful resources; and we connect a global, multidisciplinary community of educators through our primary initiative, the [Association for Contemplative Mind in Higher Education](#).