

# Building Autonomous Academic Writing Skills through Free writing

TATJANA KOROPEC

Faculty of Economics and Business  
University of Maribor, Slovenia

**Abstract:- We are surrounded by modern technology but there is no such device that could transfer human thoughts from the head to the paper. In the real world, for many students and business people, writing is nearly as worrisome as public speaking. Once they are sitting in front of a blank paper or a screen, they need to have some powerful techniques to create a meaningful and impressive presentation, a report, a proposal or an article. Freewriting is a very powerful method in our writing practice and it is a way to tap into our creative side. This article aims to explore the use of freewriting and focused freewriting in the context of developing ESP students' English writing skills and promoting students' academic skills development, particularly in the area of academic writing.**

**Keywords:- Academic Writing, Creativity, ESP (English For Specific Purposes), Focused Freewriting, Writer's Block.**

## I. INTRODUCTION

Nowadays we are surrounded by modern technology and digital devices are available for any kind of activity in our daily life. The same refers to students at the tertiary level attending lectures, conducting their research and submitting their assignments. When learning foreign languages they can use countless applications, like apps for pronunciation practice, distant language learning, online language courses, videoconferencing, virtual classrooms, mobile phones for vocabulary activities - just to mention a few. When they do attend lectures at brick and mortar institutions they can use mobile phones, tablets, laptops, and eBooks during their classes. It is a digital era for a digital generation. However, once a language learner comes to the point to develop and increase their writing skills it comes back to the old-fashion technique – practice, practice, practice – either using a paper and a pen or a computer. Students at the tertiary level are required to prepare presentations, to write reports and seminar papers. Subsequently, they have to write their thesis. Ending up in the corporate world they have to answer e-mails, write proposals and reports, prepare presentations and contracts. In the real world, for many students and business people, writing is nearly as worrisome as public speaking. Once they are sitting in front of a blank paper or a screen, they need to have some powerful techniques to create a meaningful, complex and impressive piece of writing, well-structured and with a clear purpose in mind. Therefore an important task of a language teacher is to encourage students to improve, develop and increase their

writing skills, especially in the area of academic writing, whether in a native or in a foreign language.

In this article, I focus on the benefits of freewriting for students by first defining the key term, then describing how freewriting works, and afterward showing how it can be successfully and effectively used in lectures to enhance students' fluency, creativity, and reflection in writing. I conclude the article by asserting the benefits of freewriting to students engaged in graduate studies.

## II. WHAT IS FREEWRITING?

The idea of a freewriting practice as a method which can be successfully used in the language learning environment was first introduced by Peter Elbow (1973) who simply and clearly described his philosophy as following:

“The idea is simply to write for 10 minutes... Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a spelling, just use a squiggle or else write, »I can't think of it.« Just put down something. The easiest thing is just to put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it's fine to write «I can't think of anything to say, I can't think of anything to say» as many times as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you never stop.” (p. 3)

Another author, George Jacobs (1986), emphasised the importance of »quickwriting«, which according to him has three main characteristics: »concentrating on content, not worrying about form, and writing without stopping« (p. 282). Besides freewriting and quickwriting there are other terms used such as »loopwriting«, »speedwriting«, and »flashwriting« (Macrorie, 1976, Cowan, 1983, Lane et al. 1984). There are slight differences among these terms in the sense of how they are used. For the purpose of this paper the term freewriting will be used all the time. The main purpose of freewriting is to generate ideas, as many ideas as possible. It is a process of creating and producing and not editing and correcting.

### III. GUIDELINES FOR STUDENTS

I became interested in freewriting after attending the Creativity Workshop offered by Shelley Berc and Alejandro Fogel. While participating in the workshop I realized the freewriting activities (or spontaneous writing as they call it) could be effectively used during lectures. I have used these freewriting activities while teaching Business English to students at the tertiary education level.

Jabos (1986) suggested a list of nine ground rules for freewriting in an ESL environment (p. 284). In my practice, I started with those suggestions and then over time and in my particular target audience, I have developed the following set of guidelines for students, either for small or large groups, for tutorials, or when students are working on their own at home.

Set a timer for 10 minutes. Decide on a medium – pen, pencil, computer...

You can start writing. When you begin, write anything that comes to your mind. Pay no attention to grammar, punctuation, spelling, style, structure. (Students may be asked to stay on one topic - focused freewriting; or to let their minds go where they want - freewriting.)

Do not stop writing and do not change anything.

If you do not know the word in English, leave a space or write the word in Slovene and then continue in English.

Freewriting is not graded or marked. It is not corrected by the teacher and shared in front of the class unless the student expresses the desire to do so.

After completing the first round of writing, read through what you have written. Highlight or circle anything that you find interesting. These words or ideas can be used later for focused freewriting.

Use the best ideas and continue with your writing. You can repeat the exercise many times. Always read your writing and select the keywords and important points that are worth further exploration. Then start the next round of writing with selected words at the beginning. This repeated process can slowly move you to explore further until you reach a clear understanding of your topic.

### IV. CREATIVE WRITING PROMPTS FOR STUDENTS

There are some variations to the basic technique which proved to be efficient and successful in my classrooms. I have been teaching Business English at the Faculty of Economics and Business and my students' language proficiency is B2 or C1. They are getting ready to enter the corporate world and those in their final year of studies will be soon preparing their thesis. With this goal in mind I have selected some prompts which can help develop skills and smoothly lead students from freewriting to focused freewriting exercises, then to topic-based writing and eventually to the academic writing skills.

1. **Quotation, proverb, saying or short story** – all these can provoke strong feelings and provide valuable material for students to explore. There are many websites with suitable quotations and similar content available. For

example

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/robertberger/2014/04/30/top-100-money-quotes-of-all-time/#43e1534e4998>. Some examples of quotations are, “A Penny Saved is a Penny Earned” by Benjamin Franklin or “Money often costs too much” by Ralph Waldo Emerson.

2. **Question** – For example provocative questions about ethical issues - Is it ethical that a football player is earning much more than a nurse?

3. **Video** – An excerpt from a movie, a piece of news, an interview.

(Ted Talks <https://www.ted.com/talk>, Keiser Report <https://www.keiserreport.com/>, etc.) Example: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=yh4nhkuvuFc>.

4. **Picture** - An advertisement, maybe from an old magazine, a picture of an art piece, or a picture of a product.

5. **Brainstorming** – gathering ideas, accumulating thoughts, drafting concepts.

6. **Retrieval practice, revision, and reflection** - At the beginning of a class, students write down major ideas they can remember from the previous session. They can do the same activity at the end of the session. Also, students can do a freewriting activity after listening to a peer's presentation. In such a way they gather ideas and information which they remembered after listening to the presentations.

7. **My learning goals** - Students create a list of skills and topics they would like to improve during the course. They can explore four areas: writing, speaking, listening and reading in English and think about their strengths and the areas they can still improve and develop. Accordingly, they can prepare their learning plan. Such an activity can be particularly effective in the first session.

8. **Five W's and H questions** – Who? What? When? Where? Why? How? – Students can explore an idea and collect the key information about the given topic simply by asking and answering 6 questions. When students are selecting ideas for their presentations I usually suggest to follow 6 questions to get their topic and rough structure of the content.

9. **Thesis preparation** – The thesis is students' independent work to demonstrate their knowledge and skills in their particular field of studies. Such a complex, well- structured and concise work should be carefully planned from the very beginning. It can be started and researched by focused freewriting by answering the initial questions like: What do I want to research? What should be done? What are the objectives of my work? What will be the outcome? How will I do it? In such a process freewriting can serve as a useful tool for research, exploration, and understanding.

### V. FEEDBACK

Usually, students' work is corrected and feedback is given in order to improve and develop by being aware of the mistakes. A language teacher would search for specific vocabulary and spelling mistakes, select language problems and suggest improvements, provide comments in rhetoric, suggest changes on effectiveness – but not in freewriting. Sharing pieces of freewriting with others, giving feedback and correcting mistakes have always been the most disputable topics in the freewriting method. Coming back to

the father of freewriting, to Peter Elbow, he questioned this topic long ago. He did emphasise strongly that all these would destroy the fundamental idea and the benefits of the whole concept of freewriting: it is a creative process, a writing process while accumulating ideas, thoughts, and concepts and it is not a final piece of work. Once students are advanced users of English and Business English they are able to learn independently and study a foreign language through a Self-Directed Learning approach. That means the teacher takes on an advising and supporting role while students manage their own learning process. They can set their learning goals, search for material, new vocabulary and grammatical rules, ask for help, reflect and evaluate their results, and monitor their own progress.

## VI. CONCLUSION

The most obvious outcome from the freewriting exercises and activities has been students' intensified understanding of the nature and process of freewriting and focused freewriting, leading to academic writing, which was accomplished by students participating in several focused freewriting exercises on topics relating to their thesis writing.

As students were able to gain a clearer understanding of the requirements of thesis writing, they became less confused and anxious, and their self-confidence about academic writing vigorously improved through continual daily freewriting practice.

The positive feedback of the students and the lecture-based evidence of the benefits of freewriting, support the case for focused freewriting as a useful pedagogical approach in the conditions of academic skills development, especially in the area of academic writing in a foreign language. Freewriting and focused freewriting have the potential for wider applications in teaching to enhance student engagement in higher education, and therefore they deserve further application and deeper research in the future.

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## APPENDIX

### Examples of students' freewriting practice

#### Student A - the first freewriting attempt:

*“What should I write, what can I write, No idea, I have no idea what to write. No thoughts, no nothing. I don't want to think now. My mind is empty, it is blank. .... I feel preasure to write. I don't want to do anything now, no thinking, no writing, no planning... The only thing I would like to do now – these days – the only thing is travelling. Going far away. No researching, no planning, no nothing. Only travellig. Pack my bag, hit the road and go, no planning, no booking, no reservation, just go... Where would I go? What do I want to do with my life? What do I want to do? Where do I want to live?”*

#### Student A - the third exercise: Focused freewriting

##### *Selected words from the previous freewriting exercise: TRAVELLING, PLANNING*

*“This freewriting is becoming more pleasant - I've got more ideas. I am thinking to research travelling for my thesis. I could research different countries and their customs, habits, rules,.... I could compare other countries and Slovenia. Maybe business, how they do their business, behaviour, customs, protocol, ethics, ...Maybe interview a businessman or woman to gather information about different business cultures, Where to get a contact for such a person? Do I know anyone in the business world? Someone working in a company? In Maribor? Working in export-import department? Speaking different languages? Travelling? Travelling for business, not leisure, ... Whom do I know? I should research Internet, ask somebody, ask my friends,.... Ask my teacher... So I can write about travelling... what about planning? How can I plan my thesis? It can be obut travelling – but this sounds like too much fun, it should be serious. It is my thesis, my final work... So, travelling, languages, business, other cultures... I should collect more ideas...”*

#### Student A - the fifth exercise: Focused freewriting

##### *Selected words from the previous freewriting exercise: TRAVELLING, CULTURES, BUSINNES*

*“Well, really, this is getting quite interesting: my ideas for the thesis: I can write about different cultures, compare business cultures in different countries, and research the characteristics of conducting business, meetings, negotiations, presentations, dress code, perception of time, business gifts, business lunch, small talk, business cards, ethics and moral in business, ... and so on. I can compare 3 or 4 or 5 counties, including Slovenia. Maybe I can get different business people who travel to foreign countries and do business in foreign countries – they can help me and provide information – about business cultures. I will have to prepare a questionair and write good questions to get proper data. I can compare few issues in different Countries. Dress code for example in Slovenia, Germany,*

*one country in South America, one in Asia, Australia – to really have varieties of cultures...”*

Student A - the seventh exercise:

*“I know exactly what I am going to write about for the topic. It will be about Pitfalls in international business. Misunderstanding in Intercultural communication. What we can do wrong, where we can make a mistake, we do not understand the customs, the body language, the mimics, we don't understand the language, we translate the logo in a wrong way – like NOVA – in Spanish means don't go – I was reading an article about wrong translations. So, I can write about this kind of problems, mistakes, pitfalls, traps, flonders – So I will select few countries: Slovenia, Germany, Argentina, Japan, Australia. Then I will select some topics: dress code, body language and eye-contact, small talk, gifts, colours, and language. For language I will search for examples of wrong translations – logo, brand name, product name, slogan, ... - misunderstanding, different meaning in a local language. Even about all these I can talk to businesspeople. I really have to find some relevant business men and women to get the first hand information. That's my next task – to get contacts for the interviews....”*

Student B - the first freewriting attempt:

*“What will i write for my thesis, how should I know, how could I know, I think about advertising, what about advertising, it's too much of everything, advertising pollution, advertising suffocation, advertising madness, advertising budget, walking advertising, yeah when I'm wearing a t-shirt with logo, maybe I can research this, we are all wearing logos around and no one is paying us for advertising, actually I buy a tshirt and I pay for it!!!!!! Yeah,yeah,yeah, that's my topic, advertising, promoting, ...”*

Student B – the fourth exercise:

*The key words from the previous freewriting exercise:  
ADVERTISING, INFLUENCERS*

*“My plan is to research about influencers:*

*WHO are they, who are they writing about, whom are they promoting, who are the most famous influencers today, in fashion, in sport, in ... , digital celebrities, definition and behaviors of an influencer, personalities, qualities, characteristics, ...*

*WHAT characteristics do they have – profession???, skills, knowledge, competences, abilities,... What kind of agreement is there between the influencer and a company? Payment, regulations, conditions,...what is the influencers impact on sales?*

*WHERE they get the material from, where do they show their writing, platforms... Instagram, FB,*

*WHEN do they write about products, services, at launching, at maturity,*

*WHY do they select one product and not the other? Why do followers like one particular influencer?*

*HOW do influencers find brands? How do they select products / services? How are they paid? How do influencers affect consumers' behaviour / influence on consumers' behaviour? How do influencers impact us – customers?”*