Preface for Students

Dear Students,

All writing is personal. Even if the essays you write have nothing to do with your life, your written words reveal something about you.

That may be scary, but it is exciting too; communicating your own truths in a clear way can be satisfying and even fun.

But in a time when experts in artificial intelligence are training computers to write "essays," you might ask, why should we humans continue to write them?

The answer lies in the vastness and beauty of *human* intelligence. Essays written by computers are laughably empty. They may provide usable information, and you might find it useful to explore how they work. But the essays you'll learn to write in this book could *never* be written by a computer. Only *you* can write essays that grow out of your own lived experiences and thoughts.

Becoming proficient at the skills of essay writing is an excellent way to develop your sophistication as an academic thinker and communicator. Essays of all sorts are an invaluable form of expression, both as art and as a means of public and academic discourse. When you drink in someone else's essay your mind is nourished, and when you write your own you go on a journey into the many layers of your own thinking.

Maybe you have already had the pleasure of writing essays you are proud of and sharing them with others. Or perhaps you habitually fret about your writing, dislike doing it, and worry whether you have interesting or valid things to say.

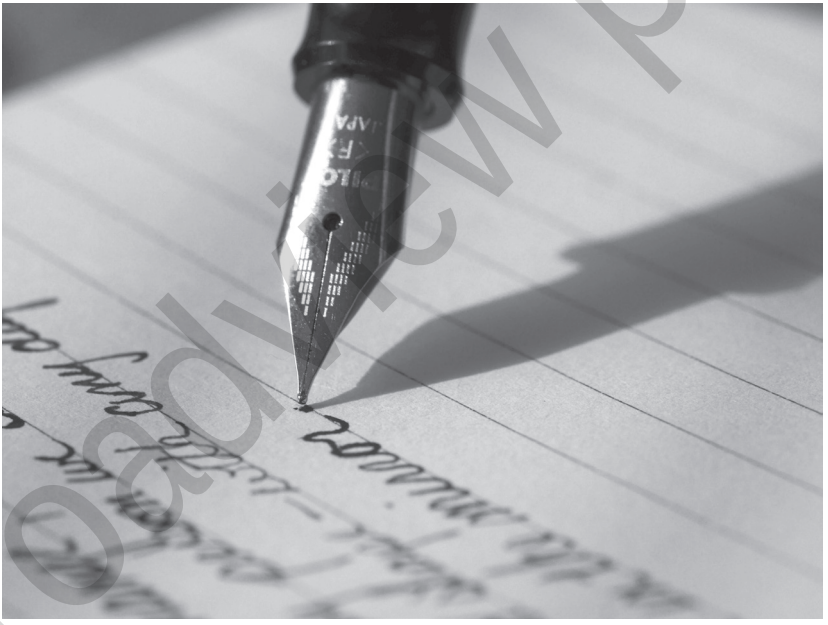
Wherever you are with writing, this book will help you get better.

In the first three parts I'll be leading you through three main essay assignments: a personal essay, an essay about readings, and a research essay. Each will take a total of four weeks, during which you will explore each

essay's form and then write, read, reflect, draft, and revise. I'll encourage you to develop and trust your own thinking as you learn skills and strategies for writing essays that only you can write, in response to your professors' assignments. The information and experience you get from this book will be useful both for the class you're currently in and for essays you'll write for the rest of your life.

The last two parts of the book are for you to read at any point in the course. Part Four is about mindfulness and how it can help you with psychological and practical issues that may arise while writing. Part Five is about feedback, with specific guidance for working in groups with classmates and other peers.

Happy writing!



INTRODUCTION

Starting Ideas and Fundamental Practices

EXERCISE 1

Your Writing Process So Far

Answer the first question below and then three or four of the subsequent questions. Write down your answers first and then share them in conversation with one or more classmates. As you listen to your peers, note the differences and similarities among you:

- Do you like writing? Why or why not?
- What is your favorite kind of essay to write? Least favorite?
- When you write essays for school, do you write them just once, or revise them?
- Is your process of writing different depending on the kind of assignment you have? How?
- What is your favorite part of the process of writing an essay? Least favorite?
- Is there anything about writing essays that you wish you could learn to do differently?

First of All, What Is an Essay?

Many students come to college thinking that writing an **essay** is a single type of writing project, whether you write it for a literature class, a history seminar, a psychology exam, or in any other context. But that's not the case.

Just as films are divided into genres of comedy, drama, thriller, etc., essays are divided by genre as well. Your essay assignments in college will most likely involve genres ranging from argumentative essays to book reviews, close readings of texts, philosophical meditations, interviews,

summaries, research reports, and many other genres your professors might assign. From one academic discipline to another, and even within one college class, your assignments will require you to write essays in very different ways.

Some genres, from lab reports to legal briefs, have strict rules of form and content that writers must follow; others give you more freedom to write in a way that suits you. But behind the scenes of *any* genre there's an author working to articulate something that hasn't been said before, using practices that fit the genre's purpose. As you'll see in this book, you can bring your own personal spark to your work within the conventions of any genre you write in. Even if it's an often-used genre, on a topic many others have also written about, no one has written the words *you* will write as you construct your essays.

"Genre"

An essay's **genre** is its "type," or "style," or "subject." For example, an **argumentative** essay is a genre in which the writer takes a position and demonstrates its truth with evidence; an **analysis** can be defined as one that explores various elements of a topic.

There are many genres of essays in the academic world and beyond, and each has its own conventions and rules. Writing effective essays requires that you are aware of the genre you're writing in, and what its audience expects from you. Read essays in the genres you write in and ask professors about how they work.

In a sense, all essays are "personal," since they are based on the writer's particular way of looking at and engaging with a topic. But there's a big difference between personal in the sense of "I'll tell you about my life" and personal in the sense of "here's how I think about this topic."

Even in **personal essays**, the genre you'll explore in Part One of this book, there is plenty of variation. Many personal essays explore an author's lived experience in autobiographical detail. But a "meditation" is a personal essay in which the writer reflects on a question or idea, describing how their mind moves to consider various sides of it. You wouldn't necessarily know about the writer's *life* from that sort of essay, though you would still get an idea of who the writer is as a person.

When you read **academic essays**, in contrast, you're probably much more interested in ideas and information than in who the writer is. And

yet academics make many individual choices in writing such essays: what to emphasize, how to describe things, what kind of voice to use, and which directions to pursue. Such decisions give you a sense of the writer as a person, even if you know nothing about their lived experience.

Creating essays in *any* genre requires you to make choices that reflect something about your uniqueness.

"Voice"

A writer's voice is the "sound" of their language. Even when you read quietly to yourself, you get a sense of a writer by the way they "speak" to you. Different genres require different voices: a personal essay can be informal and chatty; a psychology case study should sound scholarly and serious.

To communicate well in our culture you need fluency in a range of media, not just the written word, so learning to write can also involve learning to use that media effectively. I'll be instructing you here solely in written forms, but I hope and expect that you can apply the ideas and methods in this book to creating expository work in all media. It is possible to view films, webpages, podcasts, and other electronic media as electronic forms of essays, in that they work by leading viewers or listeners through a constructed series of concepts made coherent by an overarching theme and structure.

So how does the process of creating an essay work? Some students come to college or university imagining that professional writers compose essays and books by starting with the first sentence, writing paragraph by paragraph through to the end, and then sitting back with satisfaction, finished.

However, good writing of any kind virtually never works like that.

Writing means revising, and revising means far more than adding a sentence or two to a first draft and making a few grammatical changes. The process of constructing an essay works at its best when it involves drafting in various stages, and then sharing, deleting, adding, sharing some more, adding more, deleting more, reshaping, sharing, rethinking, adding, deleting, sharing, and doing it all over again—not necessarily in that order or that number of times, but you get the idea.

As you revise, keep your audience in mind. What do they expect from the genre you're writing in? What will they value? The more you know about the type of essay you are writing, the easier it will be to answer those questions.

Your essays should start out one way and become quite different once you've revised them. Maybe you've heard about the idea attributed to the

artist Michelangelo talking about his sculpture: that the beautiful statues he made were *already there* in the blocks of marble he started with—he simply had to chisel the rock away to get to them. Chiseling takes a long time, and sometimes revising can feel the same way: the rough draft is the rough marble, unfinished, and the process of hacking at, shaping and re-thinking, allows you to discover the essay that's been lurking there, the essay only you can write, even though at first you didn't know what its shape should be, or how you would fill in its details.

Two Muscles: Creative and Critical

Theorist Peter Elbow wrote about the fact that writing involves two different skills or "mentalities": the creative and the critical (7). I like to view them as "muscles." The **creative muscle** works as we *draft* essays: it helps us explore. The **critical muscle** is responsible for *revising*: it helps us shape our creative muscle's ideas into a coherent essay.

Composing an essay does not require each muscle to work only once, with the creative muscle writing the draft, the critical muscle revising it, and then the essay is ready to go. Once an essay draft is underway, the two muscles are at their best when they find a rhythm of alternating back and forth.

Some writers tend to be better at using their creative muscle. They're the ones who write endless pages of journal entries and emails that go on longer than average. Others are more comfortable on the critical side—their strength is to shape an essay's clarity. How about you? Are you more comfortable with one or the other?

Wherever your comfort zone is, the process of writing a good essay demands that you are adept with both muscles. However, when writers try to use both muscles at the same time, they can get stuck. Each muscle needs space to work on its own.

Your creative muscle needs space and time to create: if your critical muscle jumps in too soon with advice about what's bad, what's good, and how you

should change things, it can stifle your creative muscle with doubts that freeze the flow of ideas.

The critical muscle needs time to shape and revise: if your creative muscle gets impatient with the details of revision and insists on endless new beginnings, the result can be that the essay never gets done.

Imbalance between the two muscles, in other words, can be counterproductive.

My goal is to help you develop a great relationship with both your creative and your critical muscles, so they can work in harmony to shape your insights and knowledge into excellent essays. The key is to let each muscle work *at the right time* in the process of writing all types of essays.

Your Creative Muscle: How It Works and How to Work It

We all have deep wells of creative ideas. There's mystery in the fact that while those ideas emerge from within us, our conscious minds can't necessarily control or determine in advance what they will be. Whether we're writing a poem or solving a mathematical equation, new insights show up from "somewhere" and surprise us. The more open we are to them the more regularly they will come forth.

How can we tone our "creative muscle," teaching it to become better at taking us beyond our more superficial insights and into the sources of creative ideas? In *theory*, the answer is easy: all we need to do is let our ideas flow!

Easier said than done though, right? "Let your creative ideas flow" might sound simple, but it can also seem impossible. We might not know what to say or write, or we might think we need more information before generating useful thoughts. Or a chorus of criticism inside our heads might tell us that we *can't* come up with new ideas.

As a student, you develop your ideas through learning and questioning. But as you do so it's important to explore the quirks of your own thinking that you might not even have known you had. **Freewriting** is a practice that can help you get in touch with your creative ideas and let them flow.

What Is Freewriting?

It is writing without stopping, encouraging ideas to move out from your head to your page or screen. In its purest form, freewriting doesn't have to be, or be ready to become, anything formal or finished. It doesn't have

to be "creative," in the sense of beautiful or artistic. Instead, it's a way to work your creative muscle like physical conditioning works for athletes: they must exercise so they can play the game well, but the exercise itself is not the game.

If *the game* is the finished essay, freewriting is the *practice* of exercising the muscle that will get you to generate effective writing once it's time to play the game of getting to your final draft. It can be a painless way to grab ideas from the never-ending perceptions that are always boiling within you, sometimes beyond your conscious awareness.

There are various types of freewriting, as you'll see throughout this book. We'll begin with its purest form, unattached to any specific writing project: *writing nonstop, without thinking in advance about what you will write.*

Of course, whatever is in your head is not necessarily something you want anyone else to know about. It's nobody's business! I agree—in fact, this exercise only works if it is private, between you and yourself. You're welcome to delete what you write or rip it into pieces as soon as you're done, because the goal is simply the *process*. The *content* of what you write doesn't matter right now, because we just want to exercise your creative muscle, encouraging it to get words, any words, from your head to the page.

EXERCISE 2 (IN 2 STEPS)

Exercise Your Creative Muscle by Freewriting

Step One

This exercise requires no preparation except a pen and paper or new document on your screen. It is *private*: you don't have to show this writing to anyone. Read through these directions before you begin:

- Set a timer for five minutes.
- Start writing and don't stop. Write in sentences or phrases, not bullet points, as though you are talking onto the page.
- If you don't think you have anything to say, write a phrase like, "I am stuck." If you like, write a question to yourself about it, for example, "Why am I stuck?" Write an answer, or write about anything else, and keep going. If you get stuck again, write about that, or repeat words. The goal here is not to produce finished writing, it's to force your creative muscle to keep accessing and recording whatever happens to be in your head right now. There is always *something* there.
- You don't have to worry about grammar or sticking to a point; simply follow whatever ideas come to you.
- Follow your writing wherever it goes. Don't worry if it keeps changing direction and comes out looking like a "mess." You can delete it when it's done or throw it in the recycling bin, knowing you have *exercised your creative muscle* to get it in good shape for essay writing.

STUDENT EXAMPLE

An Example of Student Freewriting

I'm not sure what I'm thinking this isn't working I like her shoes I am feeling uncomfortable what do I really have to say I don't know I don't know. I'm tired I should have gone to bed earlier why did I sign up for this 9am class, I will never be a morning person, besides it's fun to stay up late and also how could I sleep everyone was running back and forth until 2am. Jody never seems to study but who knows she seems to do

well in classes. When is this going to be over? I am not writing anything useful I'm stuck I'm stuck what's for lunch, what's in my head the class would be better if it were later in the day. What does this writing have to do with writing essays I don't know I don't know I am tired and don't know what I'm thinking she said not to bore yourself but what if my own thinking is boring me.

EXERCISE 2 (CONTINUED)

Exercise Your Creative Muscle by Freewriting

Step Two

With a peer, your class, or just yourself, reflect on how the process of freewriting worked for you.

- How did you feel while doing this writing?
- Without going into specifics about what you wrote, what did you notice about how you proceeded—did you stay on the same subject? Did you switch gears often? Did you get frustrated? What else did you notice about how the words went, or didn't go, from your head to the page?

A potential obstacle to freewriting is the worry about what it looks like, even if we know no one but us will read it. Odd, isn't it? We may feel self-conscious *in front of ourselves*. If you don't like the way your freewriting looks and you're prone to blaming yourself, you might think, "I'm just no good at freewriting." Or, if you are prone to blaming others, you might say, "Freewriting is clearly a useless activity that doesn't work!"

I encourage you to let such responses go and simply accept your freewriting, however it turns out. People who are out of shape don't look smooth and effective when they begin a conditioning run, but that's certainly not a reason to stop! The "nonsense" that might emerge in your freewrites is the writing-equivalent of physical muscles warming up. Keep going. You're establishing a practice of fluency that will eventually allow you better access to your own ideas.

Your creative muscle's primary job is to find and dig into new material. Restarting it might hurt, just as physical muscles hurt when you use them

again after disuse. Since it's a muscle, albeit a figurative one, your creative muscle can atrophy if it isn't nurtured enough. Freewriting on a regular basis can keep it in shape.

Be wary of your inner critic, who might say things like

- "That's not good."
- "That *is* good."
- "Change that."
- "That doesn't make any sense."
- "You started out okay but you're going nowhere."

Such thoughts may be useful when you revise, but they can make your creative muscle spasm and freeze when you're freewriting. Remember, it's supposed to be "free"! Do your best to banish your own judgments at this stage. There will be time later to get in touch with your critical side.

People who have the most trouble with freewriting are often those who need it most. They often don't realize that voices in their heads are holding down their creative muscle, preventing it from finding its best ideas. Taking time to jumpstart the flow of creativity by writing without stopping can really help.

Focused Freewriting

To exercise your creative muscle, you can use private freewriting as a study break, or even just to explore why something bothers you.

There's also a more direct way to use freewriting when it comes to writing essays: **focused freewriting**. As its name suggests, focused freewriting is informal and unstructured, but meant to flesh out ideas on a *specific topic*. Here's how to do it:

- Begin with an "exploratory" topic: "What in my past could I write a memoir-essay about?" for example, or "What are my thoughts on that question my teacher has assigned for my essay?" etc. Without planning, begin writing about your topic.
- Follow tangents that come up, but keep circling back to your topic, perhaps by including questions to yourself as you write, such as, "What does this add to my thoughts about the topic?" Or "Is there an angle on the topic that I haven't gotten to?" Or "Why is this topic leading me in *that* direction?"

- When your stream of ideas slows down, keep going at least a bit longer: You might turn your last sentence into a question, answer it, and see where the answer takes you.

The point of focused freewriting is to use your creative muscle to explore a range of ideas about your topic. Most of the creative-muscle exercises in this book involve this second type of freewriting, which will help you gather material for your formal essays.

Here are some ways you can use focused freewriting:

To respond to readings: Useful when you need to keep a record of how you reacted to passages from your readings, to set you up for writing about the readings later (see also Part Two).

To get your emotions out: Useful when you are distracted by something while you're doing other work. Write to yourself about how you feel! In addition to exercising your creative muscle, it can be a great way to help you put emotions aside temporarily while you get your work done.

To figure out a problem or dilemma you encounter in the middle of writing an essay: Useful when you think, while writing, "oh no—this idea I'm arriving at contradicts what I was just saying on the previous page!" Exploring that contradiction in a separate freewrite can help you deepen the ideas in your essay, for example by using the contradiction as part of your thesis.

To find ideas you didn't yet know you had: Useful when you know you want to write about something, and you even might sense that it is a powerful topic for you, but you're not yet sure exactly what you want to say about it. Just start writing, and don't stop for a while—you might surprise yourself.

To learn about your own writing process: Useful when you want to learn more about what works for you as a writer, and what parts of your process you'd like to change. While you are writing something, or immediately after, stop to ask yourself, "How did I feel when I wrote that? Why?" You can learn a lot by talking about your writing experience with others, and hearing about theirs. For example, here is a focused freewrite by a student who was frustrated by his process:

STUDENT EXAMPLE

A Student's Focused Freewrite about His Frustration with an Essay He Wrote

I am someone that enjoys writing because it gets me to be able explore different thoughts in my brain ... Though I enjoy writing, it is something that I have always had a difficult time with. This is because I am one who struggles to extend the ideas that I have. Often when I do try I feel as though I sound repetitive and I don't want to bore the reader. This caused that essay I wrote on the Tulsa Massacre to fall short of its full potential. Most of the time I have a very great idea that I will write about, however according to the feedback that I heard from the people that read my writing, I make an exciting or interesting point but I fail to extend it. This failure will often have the reader feeling disappointed or as though I had wasted a very good idea, which is what happened. (JS)

After writing this, the student began to explore ways to extend his ideas with focused freewrites.

EXERCISE 3 (IN 2 STEPS)

Explore Your Writing Process

Step One: A Focused Freewrite about Something You've Written

Think of something you've written in the past—an essay, story, poem, play, lab report, or anything else. It can be something you wrote either for school or outside of school. You might start by making a list of past writings and then choose one. *Your topic is your experience with that one piece of writing.*

- Begin writing about your experience from any angle that comes to mind first. Here are a few possible starting points:
  - Was your writing assigned? Who assigned it? How did you feel about the assignment? If it wasn't assigned, what made you write it?
  - What moment in the writing process is the clearest to you as you think back?
  - Who, if anyone, read your writing?
  - What feelings did you have about the writing and any responses you got to it? Do you see them differently now?

- Keep freewriting for about ten minutes. Follow tangents if they arise, but keep circling back to the topic of your writing experience. Here are more questions you might address:
  - » What steps did you take as you wrote?
  - » Do you have any regrets about your experience?
  - » What are you most proud of?

Step Two: Process Writing: What Was That Like for You?

Before sharing your focused freewrite with peers or your professor, take some time to reflect on writing it:

- What thoughts were in your mind as you wrote?
- What was your process of making use of the various questions—did you stick with one? Ignore them all? Keep picking and choosing?
- Did anything surprise you in your process of writing?
- What do you notice now as you read over what you wrote?
- Is there a part you especially like or dislike?

After doing this exercise, you will have an idea of how focused freewriting works. Maybe you enjoyed it and love what you wrote, or maybe you struggled. Either way, keep going. Freewriting is different each time you do it.

Freewrite Clarification 1: It Is Not Busywork!

Students sometimes get the mistaken idea that freewriting is only something to do "on the side," unconnected to the "real" process of drafting an actual essay. "Freewrite about these ideas for a while to brainstorm," a teacher might have told those students in the past, "and then put your freewrites aside and begin writing your draft."

That might work, in theory. But it could also lead pragmatic students to say, "How about if I just skip the freewriting part and start with the draft; it saves time!"

Yes, you *could* write an essay simply by starting with your introduction and building the structure of your essay from there. You might have done so in the past. "Start with an outline," many professors have said and still say, "in which you make use of established structures or formulas." Those formulas might include the "five-paragraph essay," with an introduction

stating a thesis, three examples of the thesis, and a conclusion; a "comparison/contrast essay" in which the first two paragraphs point to similarities between two things and the second two explore differences; or many other fixed forms.

Such formulas can be useful at times. But in my experience, students who use them with an "outline first and then write" process tend to write essays that are pinched and dull, not interesting to the writer, much less the reader. Why bother?

In contrast, learning to *incorporate freewriting into your drafting process* helps to wake up your creativity and get you far more engaged. However, that leads me to my second clarification about freewriting.

Freewrite Clarification 2: It Is Not the Essay!

Students are often surprised that once they start freewriting on a topic, they generate even more pages of freewriting than the page length required in their essay assignment. Their excitement about that can lead them to think that once they have the right number of freewritten pages they have completed an interesting essay. It's certainly interesting to them! So they turn it in as a draft.

My job at that point is to disappoint them. While their freewritten "essay" contains great *potential*, and may even be engaging to read, it is not an essay yet. It needs a critical muscle to nurture, shape, and structure it! Reading raw freewriting is like reading someone's diary—if it's written by a person you love or are super-curious about it might contain fascinating moments for you, but even then it can get old fast because it will likely be rambling, repetitive, or otherwise ineffective. It's like someone rolling out of bed in their pajamas and going straight to a fancy party—they need to take time to get dressed up! Your raw writing always needs dressing up to become properly presentable to the reader. As a freewrite, it's only halfway there.

Essays require much more than freewrites do. You insult the reader if you expect them to pore through your freewrites looking for gems of insights. Your job is to find those gems yourself and make them work in a systematic and satisfying way.

This might sound like a lot of work. But don't despair! As I'll explain, the process of "building" your essay can be much easier, fun, and rewarding when you become adept at weaving freewriting into your process. Freewrites certainly do give you plenty of useful material—in fact, as you'll

see, sometimes you can lift whole sections out of them to deposit into parts of your essay drafts.

An Aside: More Thoughts about Voice in Writing

If you know someone well, you probably recognize their voice as soon as they say one word. You might have had the same experience while reading, too, when a few sentences signal a familiar writer's "voice."

Different types of essays contain different voices. Formal, serious, academic, meditative, angry, confessional, funny—there are endless possibilities. Even when a writer writes in many different styles, a close read would probably reveal elements that signal that writer's particular "voice."

It is hard to define exactly what makes a writer's voice unique, but like spoken voice it has to do with the rhythm of language and sentences, and even the choices of topics, words, and approaches.

As you develop as a writer, your own "writing voice" will develop too.

One important rule for writing is that within any single essay it is important to have a *consistent* voice. Experienced writers might combine voices in a way that suits their essay's purpose, but if you shift for no reason between, say, a serious academic tone and an emotional one your essay will seem unnecessarily confused.

The best way to get a feel for how the voice in your own writing works is to read it aloud, even to yourself alone in your room.

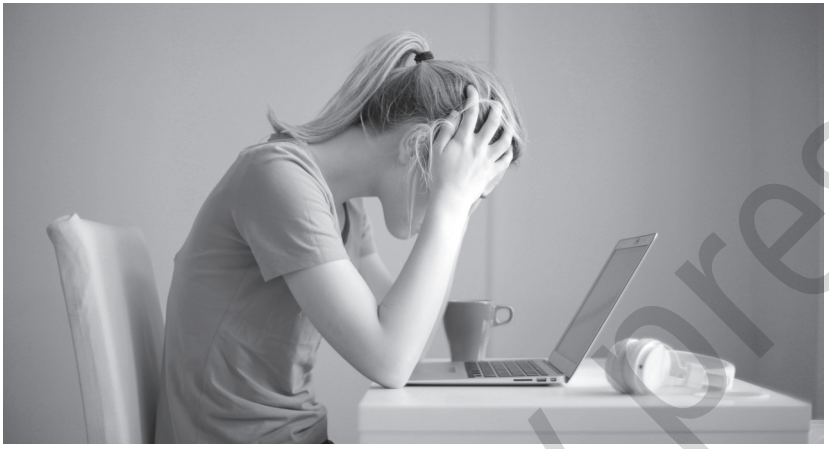
Your Critical Muscle: Its Job Is to Revise

When you freewrite, your critical muscle's job is to stand back and keep quiet. But when it's time to shape your raw material into coherent essays, your critical muscle gets its turn to shine.

Your critical muscle represents your logical, analytic side. It can work with the raw material of your freewrites and figure out how to shape their ideas into a clear essay. That involves being able to conceive of your essay as a whole, answering questions like, "What is the genre and purpose of this essay?" "What kind of voice does this essay have?" "Which ideas are most important?" "What order should they go in?" "What sections should be added or deleted?" and many other tasks, from rethinking decisions, to making sure your voice is consistent, to checking grammar and spelling, etc.

The critical muscle usually starts the process by understanding what kind of an essay you are writing, and then developing a structure and plan that will

work. There's no one way to do that, and as you'll see in this book, each essay you write requires a different kind of effort from your critical muscle.



Perfectionism, Secret Perfectionism, and How a Writer's Psychology Might Get in the Way

Before we move toward drafting your first mini-essay I want to say a bit more about psychology, in case you might get stuck at any point in the drafting and revising process with a terrible feeling of "this isn't working, I can't write this."

It could be that what you need at that point is to talk with your professor or a writing tutor about the material of your essay, and I urge you to do so.

A common reason for that frustrated-with-writing feeling is that the judge inside your head is too harsh with you. It might tell you that your idea makes no sense, that you'll never be a good writer, or any other useless criticism it comes up with that might get you to dismiss the seeds of your ideas before they even get a chance to grow into an interesting plant. Even if you know that those inner judgments are wrong and don't serve you well, *it isn't so easy to stop them*.

When I first assign freewriting, some students happily begin writing to the prompts right away. Others, though, think for a long time, begin writing, and then almost immediately put their pens down, frowning. They cross out what they wrote, write a few more words, and then cross things out again. They write another word or two and look out the window. If I say, "Keep going; write anything in your head," they grudgingly reread their writing,

cross out even more, and begin again, but soon stop and glance at the clock, willing the class to be over.

Such students might seem unengaged, and sometimes they are. But their stuckness can also be a sign that they are trying *too hard*, as opposed to *not hard enough*. They might be trying to write something "perfect" and criticizing themselves for any less-than-beautiful sentence. You have probably heard the advice such students often hear: "just loosen up!"

If you can't loosen up when you're writing, it's most likely because your critical muscle isn't giving your creative muscle enough of a chance. Imagine a child running happily to a friend or teacher to share a new idea. If the response is, "no, that doesn't make any sense! It's a terrible idea. Find something better," they may wilt, become irritable, and maybe keep their next idea to themselves. If that process happens repeatedly, they might stop even knowing what their ideas are.

That kind of unfortunate encounter can happen quite regularly *inside our heads* as we write, even if we're not aware of it. As a child gets older, their stern teacher or parent can transform into a voice inside them, made up of all the critical judgments they've heard about their writing or themselves. "Too choppy," "too bland," "not structured enough," "undeveloped," "disorganized," "boring," "not grammatically correct," etc. The psychological effects of comments like that can last a lifetime.

Writers might see criticism of a single piece of writing as not just about that piece but about *who they are*: "I *am* a poor writer," or "I *am* bad at descriptions," or "I *am* too wordy," as though those qualities are fixed and impossible to change. They aren't! Those qualities in fact can always be changed.

If you judge yourself relentlessly, you might be a "perfectionist," or you might even be what I call a *secret perfectionist*. I once met a tennis coach at a party who asked if I played. "Uh, a little," I said, "but I'm terrible, and haven't really gotten anywhere." "Oh," he said, "you must be a perfectionist." What? Me? I was surprised, since I was nothing like what I imagined a tennis perfectionist to be: someone who'd patiently practice serves and volleys for hours until they got it right. I certainly didn't see my feeble attempts at tennis games as perfectionistic at all. I just felt bad because I wasn't any good.

But the coach explained that in his experience, sometimes people are such perfectionists that they can't stand to play tennis if they make a lot of mistakes at first. He'd seen lots of people walk away from the sport simply because they wouldn't allow themselves to be the beginners that they were.

Something clicked for me when he said that. Had I unconsciously *chosen not to play* rather than having to deal with the embarrassing realities of my imperfections as a tennis player? It sounded quite possible.

That kind of struggle applies to writers too: the desire to quit or do the minimum when it comes to writing can indicate that you want so much to be a fantastic writer that you can't bear to live with yourself as not-so-good. That fact can be a secret, even to yourself! Of course, the only way to become good at tennis, writing, or anything else is to keep going, knowing that the more you practice the better you become. But that's not easy when psychological forces are in your way.

It might be useful to know that even very successful writers have those unpleasant moments when their writing seems impossible to repair. They find ways of navigating those moments, and you can too. It's not easy to conquer harsh inner voices criticizing our writing. But becoming aware of them is an important first step, as is realizing that being "good" as a writer is something you really want. You'll find more tips about how mindfulness can help you in Part Four of this book.

Self-judgment isn't necessarily bad, of course. In fact, having a well-developed internal critic of your writing, one who insists that you revise until an essay really shines, is crucial if you want to produce really good writing. *We really need that critic* to help us make our essays, or our tennis playing, as good as they can be.

But that critic usually only works well when it stays away from useless and false criticisms that don't help, like, "you're a terrible writer" or "this will never work." A good internal critic leaves you alone in the early stages of a project, freeing you to stumble and make mistakes. Like athletes and musicians, we get better if we take plenty of time to *practice*, which in essay-writing can mean letting the creative muscle branch out at first, without being judged.

EXERCISE 4

Reflect on Your Inner Critical Voices

- What have you heard from teachers or other people about your writing, positive or negative?
- Do you have a voice in your head criticizing your writing?
- If so, what does it say, and how do you react?

Not all resistances to writing are based on inner psychological struggles, though. Sometimes the problem is that you simply are not sure how to proceed when you write, because you need answers to practical questions about how to generate ideas and structure them effectively.

The main essay assignments in the first three parts of this book will help you with that. Each focuses on a particular type of essay, and then leads you through composing one of your own. You'll use versions of the same moves you followed when you wrote your mini-essay: freewrite with your creative muscle to generate ideas, plan and shape those ideas with your critical muscle's assessments, and let the muscles take turns as you build the essay's content and structure.

MAIN ASSIGNMENT

Write a Mini-Essay in Two Parts

The purpose of this assignment is to help you discover some ways that your critical muscle can help you revise your creative muscle's creations. You'll use both muscles to construct *an informal mini-essay* (about 150–300 words).

Informal means that you can write in a conversational voice, without necessarily beginning with a formal introduction or ending with a fixed conclusion. However, your final version should contain at least two coherent paragraphs that allow the reader to follow your line of thinking.

PART 1: YOUR LIST AND YOUR CHOICE

Follow this sequence of steps:

- Off the top of your head, *make a list of things you like*. Choose anything that comes to mind. For example, my list right now contains raspberries, swimming, giraffes, the color blue, my friend Luis, and city streets. What comes to mind for you?
- When you have at least five items, pause to look over your list. *Choose one item* you feel like spending some time with.
- *Do a focused freewrite* about that item for at least five minutes, seeing where your topic pulls you. Begin with whatever first thoughts on the item emerge when you start writing and keep going as other thoughts and stories arise. If you get stuck, ask yourself "what else?" and keep

writing: *you might comment on what you've written so far, ask a question, or delve into a specific memory*.

STUDENT EXAMPLE

From a Student's Focused Freewrite about Frogs

Frogs. What do I know about frogs? Not a bloody thing. They have warts, are slimy, they pee in your hand. Frogs croak, toads peep. Is that right? Are toads and frogs different? Frogs are amphibians. They like swampy areas, begin as tadpoles. Princesses kiss frogs and they change to princes. This is stupid. I know as much about frogs as I do about rockets.

Some frogs are poisonous and colorful. I remember a fairy tale about frogs where the princess kisses the frog and it turns into a prince. Or is it the other way? The prince kisses the frog? That doesn't sound right. Why doesn't it sound right? Why is there something about a woman kissing a frog that sounds "right" and a man kissing one that doesn't? Is there some gender thing at work here? Back to poison. Why are the frogs colorful? Wouldn't that attract predators to them? When I don't want to be noticed I don't wear hot pink.

Note that the student writing about frogs paused early in his freewrite, criticizing himself and maybe the assignment. He then noticed that he raised some interesting *questions*:

- Are toads and frogs different?
- Why do princesses kiss frogs in stories?
- What memories does he have about frogs?

As he stepped back again and read through this additional freewriting with a group of classmates, the student made use of his critical muscle and decided he liked *the question*, "Why do only princesses get to kiss the frog in fairy tales?" Here's how he drafted a mini-essay from there:

STUDENT EXAMPLE

"Frogs"

When it comes to frogs, one common occurrence in fairy tales is that the frog is seen as an ugly being, perhaps not taken seriously by most. However, at the same time, frogs in tales seem to have a habit of getting into conversations with princesses quite easily. Maybe it's their seeming ugliness that somehow makes them seem safe? Whether they're safe or not, princesses do seem to enjoy talking to them.

Furthermore, those princesses can also have the power to transform them with a kiss. Why is it that only princesses have that power? Could a **prince** kiss a frog and help him out? I've never seen that, and it doesn't seem possible, at least in the world of fairytales I've heard about. Why not? I'd like to research it further, because I think it could tell me something about what children's fairytales are teaching them about gender. Maybe the princess, by kissing the frog, proves that she is a generous and open person, and not scared of a being who is supposedly different and even ugly? Is her generosity the message of the story?

If it is, it relies on the idea that frogs are ugly and unappealing. That can be quite a misperception, since some of them are quite beautiful. What if we imagine a frog in a fairy tale as one of those beautiful blue ones? Or am I getting too carried away with all this? After all, I'm just talking about frogs!

Another direction: Not sure if he liked this direction, the student went back to his original freewrite and wrote a second mini-essay, one that considered *a different question*: "Why do some frogs have bright colors?"

I have seen plenty of ordinary frogs in person, perhaps on a rock by the side of the lake or jumping around in grass as rain approaches.

But how about the more unusual frogs, the one with the colors? I've seen those only in pictures. A quick Google image search reveals some great ones—a beautiful "blue poison dart frog," or an electric-green one with bright red eyes. There's even a YouTube video called, "The 7 Most Beautiful Frogs in the World." Your idea of beauty might not be the same as theirs, but to me these frogs certainly are beautiful. Their colors look like they're wearing works of art.

Why did their colors develop that way? Wouldn't the colors attract predators? Or does it have something to do with their reproductive experiences? I'm guessing they use their beautiful skin to flirt. Who **wouldn't** be attracted to a turquoise coat threaded through with twisty brown lines? I'd like to know more about how that all works.

Thus the student has written drafts of two promising mini-essays. As you can see, seemingly "throwaway" freewrites can help you develop intriguing thoughts in many different directions if you allow your critical muscle to work with them.

PART ❷: CONSTRUCT YOUR MINI-ESSAY

- When you're ready to stop, after at least six or seven minutes, *bring in your critical muscle to read over your freewrite*.
- Find *an idea or question* in what you've written that you find intriguing. Maybe you haven't written it yet, and it emerges as you reread your freewrite. If you feel stuck, share your writing with someone and ask for help finding an idea or question in your freewrite.
- *Write a draft of your mini-essay* based on that idea or question, following any tangents that occur to you as you develop your idea.
- Shape your draft into at least two coherent paragraphs that follow a line of thinking about your idea or question. If they seem too long or contain different ideas, experiment with dividing them into multiple paragraphs.
- Read your draft aloud, ideally to a classmate or friend, paying attention to whether your overall perspective is consistent. For example, in the first Frog example above, the student's perspective was on gender issues. In the second, the student wrote with an artistic/scientific perspective. What overall perspective do you have?
- If you like, ask your classmate what they like best in your draft, and what they might like to hear more about or see you do differently.
- Read through and tweak again until you feel satisfied that your mini-personal essay works well as a whole.