

Rules for Free Writing

adapted from the book *Writing Down the Bones* by Natalie Goldberg



First Thoughts

The basic unit of writing practice is the timed exercise. You may time yourself for ten minutes, twenty minutes, or an hour. It's up to you. At the beginning you may want to start small and after a week increase your time, or you may want to dive in for an hour the first time. It doesn't matter. What does matter is that whatever amount of time you choose for that session, you must commit yourself to it and for that full period:

1. **Keep your fingers moving.** Don't pause to reread the line you have just written. That's stalling and trying to get control of what you're saying.
2. **Don't backspace and delete things.** That is editing as you write. Even if you write something you didn't mean to write, leave it.
3. **Don't worry about spelling, punctuation, or grammar.** Think of freewriting like a faucet for your imagination. It's going to be a little messy, but that's okay. As long as you can figure out what you wrote, all is well.
4. **Don't worry about creating a solid, logical piece of writing.** There is literally no objective here. You're writing whatever comes into your mind. When you tire of that topic, switch to a new one. Go with the new topic as long as it feels "hot". When that idea dries up, switch again. Stick with each idea for at least four to five sentences to develop a little cohesion. The writing cannot be nonsensical. If you "can't think of anything to write", choose an object in the room and describe it *thoroughly*. When you finish writing about that object, choose another one and write about it for several sentences. Hopefully, something more meaningful or interesting will occur to you, but if it doesn't, that's perfectly okay.
5. **Follow where your mind goes.** If something comes up in your writing that is scary, dive right into it. It probably has lots of energy.

Writing as a Practice

This is the practice school of writing. Like running, the more you do it, the better you get at it. Some days you don't want to run and you resist every step of the three miles, but you do it anyway. You practice whether you want to or not. You don't wait around for inspiration and a deep desire to run. It'll never happen, especially if you are out of shape and have been avoiding it. But if you run regularly, you train your mind to cut through or ignore your resistance. You just do it. And in the middle of the run, you love it. When you come to the end, you never want to stop. And you stop hungry for the next time.

That's how writing is, too. Once you're deep into it, you wonder what took you so long to finally settle down at the desk. Through practice you actually do get better. You learn to trust your deep self more and not give in to your voice that wants to avoid writing. It is odd that we never question why a football team would practice long hours for one game, yet in writing, we rarely give ourselves the space for practice.

When you write, don't say, "I'm going to write a poem." That attitude will freeze you right away. Sit down with the least expectation of yourself; say, "I am free to write the worst junk in the world." If every time you sat down, you expected something great, writing would always be a great disappointment. Plus that expectation would also keep you from writing.

One of the main aims in writing practice is to learn to trust your own mind and body; grow patient. We must continue to open and trust in our own voice and process. Ultimately, if the process is good, the end will be good. You will get good writing.

This writing practice is a warm-up for anything else you might want to write. It is the bottom line, the most basic beginning of writing. It is like a dancer who does warm-ups before dancing or a runner who stretches before running. Runners don't say, "Oh, I ran yesterday. I'm limber." Each day they warm up and stretch.

Writing practice embraces your whole life and doesn't demand any logical form. It's a place that you can come to wild and unchained, mixing the dream of your grandmother's soup with the astounding clouds outside your window. It is undirected and has to do with all of you right in your present moment. Writing practice is our wild forest where we gather energy before going to prune our garden.

Sit down right now. Give me this moment. Write whatever's running through you. You might start with "this moment" and end up writing about some unconnected moment from your past or a daydream into the future. That's fine. Don't try to control it. Stay present with whatever comes up, *and keep your fingers moving.*

Good luck. Have fun. *Go with it!*

