



A Procrastinator's Guide to Writing

Reconsidering Beliefs That Keep Us from Engaging with Our Work

by Sheila M. Reindl, Ed.D. Copyright © 1989, 2004, 2011, 2012, 2015, 2016, 2017 by Sheila M. Reindl¹

Below are twelve beliefs that can limit our ability to engage in the process of writing and creating:

- #1. "I don't know what I want to say, so I can't start writing."*
- #2. "I have to read more before I can start writing."*
- #3. "I should be able to write a paper in one draft."*
- #4. "I don't know how to write a good paper."*
- #5. "I have to come up with some magnificently original idea and then prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt."*
- #6. "Stuckness is bad. If I'm stuck, I'm doomed."*
- #7. "Writing is a long, slow, lonely, painful activity."*
- #8. "I'm sad/lonely/upset/tired/bored/busy/confused, so I can't work."*
- #9. "Nothing can help me start working. I am just lazy."*
- #10. "I have to do the assignment I was given. I can't do what interests me."*
- #11. "I have to start by making an outline."*
- #12. "I am more focused/creative/productive when I work at the last minute."*

What follows is a consideration of each of those beliefs in the form of alternative beliefs or assumptions and new approaches that follow from those alternative assumptions.

❖ **LIMITING BELIEF #1: "I don't know what I want to say, so I can't start writing."**

Alternative Assumptions:

1. We never feel we know enough to start writing, and it is precisely because we don't know that we need to write. We can write to discover what we know, what we don't know, what we want to understand more fully.
2. Writing is not just a process of encoding something we've already figured out. If that were the case, it wouldn't be so hard or scary.
3. We know more than we think we know.

¹ The author grants permission for use of this handout to the Bureau of Study Counsel, Harvard University. Note: Parts of this handout are taken directly from "Twenty Tips for Senior Thesis Writers (and other writers, too)," written by Sheila M. Reindl and available at the Bureau of Study Counsel and at bsc.harvard.edu.

New Approaches:

1. Trust that beginning with what you don't know, with something that is unresolved for you, is exactly the right starting place for a writing project. In a course she once taught at the Harvard Graduate School of Education, Carol Gilligan talked about the imperative to orient your inquiry toward "a real question," which she defines as a question to which you don't already know the answer and to which it matters to you to know the answer.
2. Freewrite. Simply follow a thought for as long as you can; let it take you as far as it will. Just write. Don't censor for sense or grammar or spelling or anything. Just keep writing. (If you can't think of what to write next, repeat the last words you just wrote, or write, "I don't know what to say next.")

Our minds work by an associative process, by letting one thought lead to another. Freewriting respects the meandering, associative nature of creative thinking. Think of this uncensored writing as playing around in the muck that will nurture an idea rather than as putting down the sentences and paragraphs that will actually comprise the final product – that is, as soil, not seed (this idea comes from writer David Wright, who was a peer consultant at the Harvard Writing Center in the early 1980s). (For more thoughts about how freewriting works, see *Writing without Teachers*, by Peter Elbow, and the handout "Writing Things Down Before Writing Things Up," written by Sheila M. Reindl and available at the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University and at bsc.harvard.edu.)

3. Do some prompted freewriting in which you are given the first part of a sentence as a prompt and you freewrite from there (see the last two pages of this handout for a list of prompts; or, generate your own). Prompted freewriting is based on the assumption that the mind works associatively – give it a prompt, and it generates its own associations and then associations to those associations and so on. Creative and generative thinking is messy. As I have said, it is the soil that nurtures an idea rather than the perfectly formed seed that sprouts a perfectly whole seedling of thought. Let your mind wander. Make note of whatever comes to mind, however far-fetched and weird it might seem. Use arrows, circles, whatever best helps you follow a thought.
4. Trust that freewriting is not a waste of time. If you're thinking, "But I'm already behind. Why would I want to waste my time writing stuff that won't even go in the paper?" consider this: while freewriting probably won't mean less time-on-task for the project overall, it will mean that the time you do spend is more fun and more productive. It is agonizing to spend a lot of time feeling you should engage, knowing that sooner or later you have to engage, and yet not being able to engage. Rather than spending your time procrastinating and worrying and battling with yourself in your struggle to write one good draft, why not spend your time letting your mind play with ideas, even if that effort takes several drafts and is messy? Engagement feels better than non-engagement. As Peter Elbow says about freewriting, "Much or most of it will be far inferior to what you can produce through care and rewriting. But the *good* bits will be much better than anything else you can produce by any other method" (*Writing without Teachers*, p. 9).
5. Keep track of **what you already know**, what you can already say, by any means that suits you. Make an inventory or list of your thoughts; freewrite; trace the line of thinking that led you to your topic, or trace the development of the interest that led you to take the course. Jot down your hunches, prejudices, biases, inklings, and gripes. One person I know writes brief memos to herself that start out "Today, one of the things that stands out to me about this whole topic is _____."
6. Keep track of **what you don't know**. Write down the questions you have, the things you wish you knew. Write down what you hope to learn. Taking an inventory of the things you don't know is every bit as valuable as acknowledging the things you already do know.
7. You can also write down **things you can't say**. Peter Elbow, in *Writing with Power*, encourages writers to record even outlandish lies and fantasies:

The French Revolution wasn't started by the Wobblies in Seattle, or by Lenin, or by Marx, or by the Marx Brothers. It wasn't part of the women's movement. It didn't last forty days and nights, it isn't in the Bible, they didn't get the enemy drunk and slide them into the sea. (p. 72)

He goes on to say how writing fantasies and lies helps:

If you let the nonsense roll effortlessly for ten or fifteen minutes – spelling out some of the fantasies at more length, too – you can discover some ideas that will help your thinking even if they are not true. (And they might be true. Could the French Revolution have been part of the women's movement?)

Writing down as many lies as you can as quickly as you can gives you glimpses of your unconscious mind. . . . [E]ven if you cannot draw any conclusions from reading back over the nonsense you have written, the process of writing it all down serves to clear some of the fog in your mind that was confusing or slowing down your thinking. You often end up with renewed energy. (pp. 72-73)

9. Keep track of what you think readers of your piece **will be curious to know**. Jot down a list of questions you think a reader would want your piece to address.

8. Write down what you would say if things were as **neat and tidy** as you'd like them to be.

10. Remember, as writing instructor Ann Berthoff says in *The Making of Meaning: Metaphors, Maxims and Models for Writing Teachers*, "Meanings don't come out of the air; we make them out of a chaos of images, half-truths, remembrances, syntactic fragments, from the mysterious and the informed" (pp. 69-70). Honor that chaos by writing it down. You might even want to keep a **journal or logbook (on your computer or in hard copy or both)**, some place to record what you think, do, read, wonder about, have insight into, or question or any given day. Refer back to your journal when you need something to get you started with your writing.

11. **As you take notes** in lecture and from your reading, record not only what is being said but what you yourself think about what is being said. You might even draw a line down your notebook page to designate a separate space for you to record thoughts such as "Doesn't this sound like what she said in class last time?" or "But Chapter Two contradicts this idea" or "Downright confusing. Is it really as confusing as he's making it seem?" or "Ah ha. Maybe this relates to those experiments that show that _____."

11. **Keep track of others' ideas**. In your notes (and in the final product), make clear which words and ideas and lines of reasoning are yours and which need to be attributed to someone else. When you are noting someone else's words or thinking, write down the information you will need to accurately cite the source in the future or to return to it again down the road. Traceability of words, ideas, and lines of reasoning is a core value in academia (see "What Do Teachers Mean by 'Collaborate'?" – a handout by Sheila M. Reindl, available at bsc.harvard.edu/bsc-handoutsts and in the Cranium Corner of the waiting room of the Bureau of Study Counsel).

12. **Have someone interview you**, ask you questions aimed at helping you discover what you know and how you yourself are connecting the various things you know. You could even have this person take notes as you talk, or you could record the conversation, so that you are free to think without having to note your thoughts. Experience tells me that the interviewee doesn't always hear their thoughts as clearly as the interviewer and that the interviewee might overlook and lose a potentially useful idea if no one takes note of their words.

❖ **LIMITING BELIEF #2: "I have to read more before I can start writing."**

Alternative Assumptions:

1. Sometimes we use reading as a way of procrastinating on writing. It is harder to generate our own words and ideas than to read and assimilate others' words and ideas.
2. Our reading and writing are best woven together, not kept as two separate and sequential steps. We need to try to put what we are learning **in our own words**. Only then do we truly know what we know and what we still want to learn.

New Approaches:

1. See New Approaches under Limiting Beliefs #1 and #6.
2. Just as you need to save often when you're working on a computer, you need to save often (in your brain) when you're reading and thinking about your paper. The way to save your thoughts is to jot them down. Otherwise, your ideas might get deleted or diffused and lost forever. Jot down notes about what is standing out to you, puzzling you today/this week as you read. Complete the sentence "What stands out to me about my topic this week is this matter of . . . ," and freewrite from there.

❖ LIMITING BELIEF #3: *"I should be able to write a paper – a good paper, or even a perfect paper – in one draft."*

Alternative Assumptions:

1. No doubt there are some gifted few who manage to produce beautiful writing in one shot – at least some of the time. Most of us mortals, however, must resort to drafts and revisions. We need to give ourselves permission to be imperfect, especially at the beginning when we don't yet know what we want to say or how we want to say it or even how exactly we want to pose the question or problem.
2. We must write from abundance and assume that much of what we write will not, need not, find its way into the final product.
3. The process itself is much messier than the product.
4. With other kinds of performances – on a piano or on ice or on a balance beam or on the stage – we take for granted the necessity of practice and rehearsal. A performer must rehearse not only in some regular, on-going way but in particular for each new performance. But somehow we don't allow ourselves, as writers, ample and quality practice and rehearsal time – replete with falls, flubs, and false starts.
5. We have within us both a creator and a critic. The creator works with wild abandon, clutter and chaos; the critic insists on perfection and neatness. If the creator is going to get anything much accomplished, we're going to need to keep the critic out of the creator's way, at least for a time. If we let them work at the same time with the same intensity, the creator will probably give up and retreat to some corner of our mind and sulk in shame and silence.
6. We don't need to write the parts of a paper in the same order in which they will appear in the final form.

New Approaches:

1. Freewrite. Let the creator do the messy work of generating ideas without worrying about whether they are well-stated, clear, or even good. The selecting, shaping, and refining can be left until later – for the critic. Let the critic know that its critical expertise will be important later but that it needs to let the creator work independently, without intrusion, for a while. Abigail Lipson distinguishes between writing things down (the work of the creator) and writing them up (the work of the critic) (see "Writing Things Down Before Writing Things Up," written by Sheila M. Reindl and available at the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University and at bsc.harvard.edu). Of course, in real life, you will never do all of the creative work as Step One and then all of the critical work as Step Two. Your creator and your critic will typically show up at the same time, each convinced that it has a right to its agenda without the other's interference. Your job is to help each make its best contributions given their different talents. This will require that you acknowledge the value of each one's role and that you ask them to take turns (over and over) so that the critic does not quash the creator's willing and vulnerable generative state of mind and so that the creator does not leave ideas in a state in which no one else can understand or follow them.

2. Allow yourself to have wild and crazy ideas. Write playfully, with abandon, out of order, without logic, about things the way you want them to be rather than the way they are. The mind works associatively, so let it associate freely.

3. Let yourself work on the part of a project that interests or engages you in the particular moment. Go with the part for which you have energy, even if you think you should work on other parts first. Managing our time well is ultimately about managing our energy well (see *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time, Is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal*, by Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz). Managing your energy well sometimes means working “out of order,” i.e., working on a part of the piece that leaves you particularly engaged and energized even if that part is not “next” in your work plan or in the final product.

The benefits of working out of order rather than strictly sequentially are akin to the benefits of having an electrical circuit wired in parallel rather than one wired in series. If you have a string of lights wired in series, when one light goes out (i.e., you stall on one part of a piece of writing), the whole string of lights goes out (i.e., you grind to a halt on your whole project). If you have a string of lights wired in parallel, when one light goes out, the others stay lit (i.e., the electricity still flows, and you can continue to work on another part of the project for which you have some energy and/or clarity).

4. If writing on a blank screen or blank page is daunting, write on scratch paper or a post-it note or the back of a used envelope or a dinner napkin or anything that will help you believe that words are abundant and expendable – not limited and sacred. Try to believe that you have a vast reservoir of words and that you needn't worry about using up some fixed number of words that are budgeted for this project.

5. Aim for the **"good enough paper."** Not the perfect paper. Just good enough. One student I know considers every paper a work-in-progress, even at the point when she hands it in. She knows that, given more time, she would reflect more and refine her thinking and her writing. But she also knows that given the constraints and demands in her life, she takes her thinking as far as she can in the time she has. She hands in a work-in-progress, one she might actually return to someday if she stays interested in the topic, but one that is good enough for now.

6. When you turn in your paper, or even a draft, append a memo in which you let your instructor know the questions and concerns you yourself have about the piece. That allows your critic to show your instructor that it has high standards even if the creator was not able to produce a product that met those standards. The memo also invites comments that can help you learn how to revise and reshape the piece.

❖ **LIMITING BELIEF #4: "I don't know how to write a good paper."**

Alternative Assumptions:

1. It's okay not to know something. That is a legitimate place to be. Granted, in college, it's not adaptive to not know how to write a paper. But not knowing is nonetheless a legitimate place to be. After all, college is a place to learn; the paper we are trying to write is an occasion to learn more about writing.
2. Even when we've written a piece that doesn't meet our standards, we can recognize and build on the best parts of that piece.
3. Even if we feel we don't write well, we might have a few gems we are proud of – even a paragraph or sentence or phrase. Those gems are worth our recognizing.

New Approaches:

1. Accept your not knowing. Begin there. That's where you are, so there's no place else to begin anyway. In some ways, not knowing is a perfect place to be. Then you can really learn something. The point of being in school is to learn, and to truly learn something, we have to begin by not knowing. It's okay not to know.

2. Keep writing, keep getting feedback on your work, and keep reading good writing. Just as with other things you've learned – to drive a car, ski, play tennis – you need to practice, get feedback, observe good models, and come to trust yourself.
3. If you need encouragement, ask someone to read your piece and tell you what most caught their interest, what left them wanting to learn more, what they learned in reading it.
4. Reread your personal greatest hits. You might be surprised. You might find yourself reassured that you have a good mind and worthwhile thoughts that you can communicate effectively to others.
5. See New Approaches #5 and #6 under Limiting Belief #3.

❖ **LIMITING BELIEF #5** *"I have to come up with some magnificently original point and then prove it beyond a shadow of a doubt."*

Alternative Assumptions:

1. "Original" need not mean "something entirely new in the history of human thought." "Original" can mean "from the source – or **origin** – that is **you**" (this idea comes from Ilana Fortgang, who was a peer consultant at the Harvard Writing Center in the early 1980s).
2. Our job is not to be a lawyer and prove our point beyond a shadow of a doubt. Our job is to show how we witness things, what we **see** as we look at some question or problem.

New Approaches:

1. Remember that there has never been and never will be another you on this planet: someone with your genes, who has inhabited the environments you have inhabited and had the particular experiences you have had. You are the only one with your particular perception, gifts, sensibilities, and experience who has lived in this day and age. Your job is to show how you, given your particular perspective, think about some unresolved question or problem.
2. Write in response to some **unresolved question** you have (or your instructor has posed) and think of your paper – and the process of writing it – as an effort to make headway toward resolution of that real question for which you don't yet have an answer. You might trade in the legalistic "I will show that ____" kind of thesis statement for a more explorative "I want to figure out how ____" approach.
3. Your unresolved question itself could be considered an original contribution. Discerning which question to ask is a creative act. Your unresolved and guiding, or governing, question – in the sense that it guides/governs your inquiry and guides the structure of your piece – derives from observations you have made that appear to be in tension with one another and to point to some apparent contradiction, mystery, conflict, surprise, discrepancy, problem, oversight, or puzzle – something that makes you stop and say, "Huh. What's going on here?" Writer and English professor Lowry Pei has said that just as in a short story we meet the protagonist at a point where their customary ways of making sense of the world fail them and we learn about that person's efforts to make some new sense of their world, so in an essay a writer meets themselves at the point where their old or usual ways of making sense of something fail them and the writer must attempt to make some new or revised sense of things.

The observations you make and the questions those observations lead you to ask are born of your particular interests, experiences, perspectives, knowledge, curiosity, and sensibilities and so they themselves are original contributions. (For more thoughts about how to come up with an unresolved and guiding question and about the competing observations that give rise to that question, see "Twenty Tips for Senior Thesis Writers (and other writers, too)," written by Sheila M. Reindl and available at the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University and at bsc.harvard.edu.)

4. Know that many professors and teaching fellows value your ideas, your response to what you've read or heard, your point of view. I have a name for this point of view or perspective your teachers want to know about: your **voice**. Voice, in the sense I mean it, is the **set of connections** you make – connections between one observation

and another, between observation and experience, between one or more texts, ideas, or thinkers, between writing and knitting (see below). The web of connections you create is your voice, your way of witnessing the world. It is the conviction of your connections – the trust that the way you witness the world is valid – that enables you to use your voice, that is, to speak with authority.

5. Remember that you do not need to completely resolve the question your paper sets out to address. Sometimes it is enough to talk clearly about how and why things are complex rather than to clear up the complexity.

6. Let your reader in on your reasoning, your thinking, your understanding. Let your readers know what you want them to take away from or learn from a chapter and from your thesis as a whole. Don't just present data.

Show your readers how you want them to make sense of the data, what you want them to see as meaningful about all that data. Show your readers the **inferences** you make, the things you see as you read between the lines. If your thesis is a museum, you are the museum guide giving your audience a guided tour. Don't just let them wander around, trying to make whatever sense they might of what's in there. Point their attention to what you'd like them to see and to the connections you'd like them to make between things. Help them to see and understand what you have come to see and understand.

Use chapter titles and subheads as important signposts for your reader and as ways of challenging yourself to summarize your thoughts. To name is to know.

7. Show the **subtleties** of your thinking. Many students rely on variations of "and" to connect their ideas: "and," "in addition," "also," "next," "another example," "later," "plus," "besides," "yet another reason." It is as though they knit one very long piece with a basic knit-one-purl-one stitch and then decide after it is long enough that they will cast off, add a few tassels or fringe and call it a scarf. That is fine when we are just learning to knit or write. But eventually, that is just not very interesting. We need to move onto sweater patterns and papers whose stitches and paragraphs are in the service of creating an overall design.

Don't say "and" when you mean to form a more precise connection: "even though," "seems like _____, but," "is insignificant until we consider," "is based on the problematic assumption that," "does not adequately address the question of," "goes even farther and demonstrates that," "despite its problems is nevertheless useful for." Use analogy or metaphor if that helps make your connection between ideas clear. Show your reader the inferences you make, the things you see as you read between the lines.'

8. Make sure your reader can tell which ideas, which words, and which lines of reasoning are yours and which are someone else's. Both by attribution within the text and by formal citation, **let your reader know where you are making your own contribution and where (and how) you are drawing upon the contributions of others**. Different disciplines have different conventions about attribution and citation. If you have questions about how to handle issues of attribution and citation, consult with your adviser or others in your field; find a manual that speaks to the conventions of your field; and look to model writings in your field in the form of professional publications, dissertations, and honors-level senior theses.

❖ LIMITING BELIEF #6: *"Stuckness is bad. If I'm stuck, I'm doomed."*

Alternative Assumptions:

1. Stuckness is a natural, even inevitable, part of the writing process – the nature of the beast, so to speak.
2. The stuckness itself can be valuable. It can point to where we need to clarify our thinking or find the courage to say something risky.

New Approaches:

1. Let the stuckness tell you where you can do some important thinking – making clearer distinctions between things that are worth distinguishing; making more precise connections between things that need to be connected; questioning your assumptions, reconfirming and disconfirming your biases. Freewrite about the stuckness: "I am stuck because I can't figure out"

2. Ease the stuckness by writing down your gripes with the author or the instructor of the course. You might discover in your griping that you have a point to make.
3. Give your procrastinating self your pen or keyboard, or at least your voice. Ask it to write down (or speak out loud) its hopes, fears, questions, wonderings. You might be treating your procrastinating self like an outlaw, trying to run it out of town, string it up, sentence it to a semester's hard labor, lock it up in its room and chain it to a desk chair, or reform it. In my experience, such efforts rarely, if ever, help a person write. Your procrastinating self might be a very creative and energetic part of you that puts great energy and creativity into finding ways not to work. If you try to get rid of it, you might be depriving yourself of its energy, not to mention its wisdom.
4. Trust that the procrastinating self is worth getting to know. Invite it to talk to you over coffee. Sit it down and get to know it. That the procrastinating self puts so much effort into not doing the work suggests there is something even more important to it than getting the work done. Why not introduce yourself to the procrastinating self and find out what it cares about, what it's scared of, what it hopes for, what it needs, what keeps it from engaging in your work? If it feels heard and acknowledged, it might find a way to join the rest of you in your work. And you might discover – and claim – a new and wise part of yourself.
5. Negotiate with yourself. To work and play with less internal conflict, you need to form alliances among various parts of yourself – for example, among the part of you that aspires to do your best; the part that values other things in life besides achievement; and the part that is afraid of failure, compulsive working, loneliness, or other potential risks of engaging with your work. To form such an alliance requires that all of the separate, uncooperative, "me/I" voices join to create a generative "we/let's" voice (e.g., "Okay, we have several different things that matter to us. Let's figure out how can we get going on this project and also help manage our fear about not being good enough and also guarantee that we can have time to play"). In creating a "we/let's" voice, you bring together all of your energies in the effort to live **a life that feels whole and true to the complexity of who you are**. (For more thoughts about negotiating with yourself, see "Twenty Tips for Senior Thesis Writers (and other writers, too)," written by Sheila M. Reindl and available at the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University and at bsc.harvard.edu.)
6. Procrastinate productively. When you are feeling daunted by a challenging part of a writing project, another task that would normally seem undesirable – e.g., cleaning a closet, paying bills, running an errand, organizing your room – can seem quite appealing by comparison. Rather than regarding that other task as a form of escape, see it as part of your writing process – a way of warming up, stalking the project (so you can pounce later), going with where there is energy in the moment. If you regard productive procrastination as part of your writing process – in particular when you procrastinate by doing tasks that you need to complete eventually anyway – you can 1) get a lot done; 2) spare yourself the energy wasted in chastising yourself; and 3) draw upon the energy and confidence you get from a sense of task completion to help you build energy and confidence for the writing task.

❖ LIMITING BELIEF #7: *"Writing is a long, slow, lonely, painful activity."*

Alternative Assumptions:

1. Sometimes we do need to sit down alone and work. But learning need not always be solitary and lonely. Learning can be a relational activity. We can have company in the process. Students often say, "I just have to do this on my own." That's true. But we needn't do it alone. Just as we have to climb a mountain on our own two feet, we do, ultimately, need to do our own work. But just as it helps to have company while we're climbing, it helps to have company in the writing process.
2. It helps to keep in mind our audience and our purpose in writing to that audience. Especially when we are writing, we need to be in dialogue with people, even if only imagined people. How can something we write be meaningful, how can it matter at all, unless it is written **to or for someone**?
3. Sometimes, writing is lonely. And painful. Much of the time it is a long, slow process. But loneliness and pain are bearable. And even a long, slow process comes to an end (and in the meantime, it can be broken down into

bearable tasks and punctuated with rest and play). Just because we feel lonely and in pain, just because writing goes slowly and takes a long time, doesn't mean that something is wrong with us or with our writing process.

4. Because writing can be an experience of sensory, social, and kinesthetic deprivation, it is important to attend to our senses, to find company, and to move. And it is essential to take breaks.

New Approaches:

1. Write in the company of another person, someone who won't mind when you look up from your work and say, "Can you listen to this and see if it makes any sense?"

2. Ask someone to read what you've written (or listen to what you've written or to your ideas) and give you a response **on your terms**. "Tell me one positive thing and one negative thing." "Tell me what makes you want to hear more." "Tell me where you first lose me." "Tell me three questions that come to your mind."

3. Talk out your ideas with someone.

4. Write your first thoughts – or your whole first draft – in the form of a letter to a parent, friend, instructor, former instructor, anyone to whom you can say, "Dear _____, I have to write this piece about _____. I'm not sure what I want to say, but I've been thinking that one thing that stands out for me is this idea that _____." You might try to write to a particular person who is a representative of the audience for whom you are writing your paper. Some people find it helpful to write these sorts of drafts as if they were an email because it frees them up to not be so perfectionistic.

5. Ask yourself who your audience is. You might imagine a real person you know who is representative of that audience. Ask yourself what that person will want – or need – to know from your piece. What are the questions that will be on that person's mind?

6. Ask yourself what you would like people to understand after they've finished reading your piece. What do you want them to "get"? Be as specific as possible. Don't just say, "I want people to know something about how violence on television affects children." **Name the particular understanding you want readers to take away from your piece.** E.g., "I want them to realize that people doing research in this field have failed to address adequately the question of _____, with the result that _____. They seem to work with the faulty assumption that _____ when in fact a more logical and appropriate assumption might be _____. The evidence (and/or the reasoning) leading me to think this way is/are _____."

7. Let yourself be lonely. Let yourself have a miserable time of it. It's not shameful to feel bad. Know that you will not always feel so miserable. Loneliness and pain will pass. If you fight the pain, it will only hurt more.

8. Treat yourself to something when you take a break or when the project is done. When you take a break, really take a break! Don't contaminate your playtime and relaxation time with thoughts of work.

9. Because writing can be an experience of sensory deprivation (and social and kinesthetic deprivation) – you are alone and focused on a computer screen, book, or blank piece of paper – it is essential to attend to your senses. Drink fragrant tea. Light a scented candle. Work in a space that is visually pleasing to you. Listen to music (or other background sound) that supports helps you attend to your work. Study in the same room with someone who is also studying, or who is simply present. Let your body move.

10. Take frequent breaks. To sustain your focus and concentration, you need to pace yourself. Pacing requires **timely and attuned breaks** – timely in that you take a break before you reach your breaking point (i.e., the point at which you are so exhausted that you collapse or are so frustrated that you avoid getting back to the task) and attuned in that it hits the spot of what you need to recharge or restore yourself at that particular point in time.

Many people say, "But my 'little' breaks inevitably last for hours." You can avoid the potential for dangerously long breaks if you **a) develop a repertoire of refreshing activities; b) experiment with breaks of different sizes; and c) develop a sensitivity to when you need a break and to what kind and what length of break you need at any given point.** Your repertoire of breaks might include talking with a friend, meditating, dancing in your room to a

favorite song, reading your email, making a phone call, taking a shower, getting something to eat or drink, taking a walk, taking a brief nap (notice how long of a nap is "just right" for you), reading a novel or a newspaper, doing the dishes, getting fresh air, doing some artwork, starting a letter to a friend, getting exercise, or running an errand. **When you take a break, ask yourself what exactly you need right now.** Do you need a change of activity (e.g., to do something physical rather than something sedentary or to work on an art project rather than a problem set)? Do you need a change of environment (e.g., to get some fresh air or to work in a friend's room or in a coffee shop)? A change of perspective (e.g., to talk with a friend or to watch a movie)? Sleep? Company? Nourishment? Distraction? The taste of chocolate? Entertainment? Notice which sorts and sizes of breaks are most responsive to particular needs. Sometimes only a long break will do. **But frequent, brief breaks can be surprisingly restorative.**

If you take an unattuned break – a break that is not attuned to what you need at that moment – the break will not hit the spot. If what would restore you is a breath of fresh air, no amount of watching television will hit that spot. If what you need is to distract yourself with a television show, no amount of chocolate will hit that spot. If what you need is the taste and richness of good chocolate no amount of running will hit the spot. If what you need is a run, no amount of talking with a friend will hit that spot. If what you need is the company of a friend, no amount of fresh air will hit that spot.

❖ LIMITING BELIEF #8: *"I'm sad/lonely/upset/tired/bored/busy/confused, so I can't work."*

Alternative Assumption:

We always have other things on our minds, other things to think about and do besides our writing. Our inner and outer lives don't come to a halt so that we can write. We need to find ways to write in the midst of and in the face of thoughts and feelings and activities and responsibilities that pull us away from our writing.

New Approaches:

1. Try an approach called **"So/And Even So."** Whenever you find yourself saying "I have only fifteen minutes, *so* I can't do anything productive," try saying, "I have only fifteen minutes, *and even so* . . . I could jot a few notes about what questions I might address in this paper/skim the beginning and end of this chapter to identify the question the writer's addressing/make a list of some of the challenges or criticism someone might make of my project/brainstorm how I might address those challenges or criticisms."

The "So/And Even So" Approach can also work when you are feeling tired, sad, lonely, scared, discouraged, overwhelmed. It is my version of an approach used by a friend who used to coach beginning adult runners. He told them they didn't need to run every scheduled running day but that on those days they just needed to suit up – put on their running clothes and running shoes. If they said to themselves, "I'm tired/busy/sad/lonely/, *so* I can't run today," he asked them to say, "I'm tired/busy/sad/lonely, *and even so*, I could suit up." The runners found that once they were all suited up, they felt that they were already on their way, and taking a run was not as daunting a prospect. Similarly, if you put yourself in a position to do your work and take even a small step in that direction, you might find that you can, and even want, to keep on going.

When you find yourself saying things such as "I'm sleepy, *so* I can't work on this"; "I haven't called my best friend in a week, *so* I can't work on this"; "I have rehearsal in half an hour, *so* I can't work on this"; "I really want to see a movie, *so* I can't work on this"; "I'm scared I'm going to fail, *so* I can't work on this," try replacing the "so" with "and even so": "and even so, I could work for fifteen minutes on tracing the line of thinking that leads me to pose my questions"; "and even so, I could brainstorm for fifteen minutes about questions I might want to address in my paper"; "and even so, I could skim this chapter to see if I can get the guiding question that the writer sets out to address"; "and even so, I could read for fifteen minutes to see how this author defines this tricky term"; "and even so, I could write about my fear and how I might proceed in the face of it." (Writing can be a way of keeping yourself company in your fear, discovering what that fear is about, letting the fear be there without letting it stop you. When you can **have** your fear rather than **be** your fear, you are not overwhelmed by it.)

2. Reserve time for you and your concerns, even if it's only a little time on any particular day. For instance, tell yourself that between 4:00 and 4:30 p.m. you are going to do something that will make you happy – take a bath,

start a journal entry, run an errand, sip tea and read a novel, email or call a friend. That way you can tell the part of you that's saying, "Hey, what about me?" that you are busy *and* that you care about it and that the best you can work out today is to give it that half hour all to itself.

3. Talk to someone. Sometimes we can work better if we talk about all the stuff that's banging around inside and creating commotion and put it outside of us, in the space between us and a good listener.

4. Write down all the worries and concerns that keep coming into your head. Once they're written down, you don't need to keep going over them in the same way (by the way, that going over and over things takes real clock time). Once those concerns are logged in, you feel less agitated; your mind and soul are less cluttered.

5. If taking forty-five minutes will let you make headway on a whole list of little tasks – pay bills, buy toothpaste and soap, balance your checkbook, fold laundry – by all means, take the forty-five minutes. Otherwise you're likely to spend at least that much time worrying (again, worrying does take real clock time and real energy), and then you'll still have the tasks left to do.

6. Remember the good ol' fifteen- to thirty-minute room clean-up. It's surprising what you can do in fifteen to thirty minutes if you go into high gear. Pretend your mother has just called to tell you that, surprise, she's in town and about to stop by your room for a visit.

7. To clear out some time for your soul, ask yourself if there's something in your list of things to do that you can **leave undone** ("I really don't need to bake homemade cookies for the party. I can just bring some from the bakery"); or **abbreviate** ("I can talk with Lani on the phone for 20 minutes instead of having what I know will be an hour-and-a-half-long dinner with her"; "I can wash out a couple pairs of underwear to last the next few days instead of doing all three loads of laundry"); or **postpone** ("we can have dinner together next week, after this paper's done"); or **delegate** ("I can ask Roger if he would be able to make sure the flier gets distributed").

❖ LIMITING BELIEF #9: *"Nothing can help me start working. I am just lazy."*

Alternative Assumptions:

1. Habits and tools can help.

2. The right frame of mind can help.

3. Company can help.

4. But if the biggest part of us really doesn't want to start working, nothing and no one can make us. William G. Perry, who founded Harvard's Bureau of Study Counsel in the 1940's, used to say something to the effect that "When you've got smart people who know what to do and they're not doing it, you know you are in the presence of forces more powerful than intelligence or knowledge, and it's time to get curious about those." We can call such a force laziness, but laziness is typically an alias for something more complex and interesting.

New Approaches:

1. Work in fifteen- to twenty-minute stretches. We tend to approach big jobs by thinking we need big amounts of time. We say to ourselves, "Hmm, I need to write these cover letters. It's 1 o'clock now. I'm free until dinner at 6 o'clock. That's five hours. I should get a lot done." But in fact, we barely make a dent. We brush our teeth, do our laundry, check our email, pay a few bills, straighten our room, make a list of errands, hang out with our friends, chat on the phone. But we spend very little **time on task** (the task of writing). That's because few of us can work for five solid hours on one thing.

Especially if you are having difficulty getting started or keeping with something try to **work for very small stretches of time**. Most of us can do most anything for fifteen to twenty minutes. Work for fifteen to twenty, break for five to ten is not a bad guideline. You might be surprised how much you can get done in fifteen to twenty focused minutes and how much easier it is to focus for fifteen to twenty minutes when you know you will soon get to take

a break. **It is much better to work for fifteen to twenty minutes and get something done than to keep thinking for five hours that you should be working and be so daunted or scared that you get nothing done.**

2. Use the **S-O-S** strategy: **Specific, Observable Steps**.^{*} Think in terms of specific tasks that you can **picture yourself doing and completing**. Examples of such tasks are "I am going to take fifteen to twenty minutes to write down a list of questions that my paper will need to address"; "I am going to take an inventory of all the things I can say, all the things I wish I could say but can't, and all of the hunches I have"; "I am going to write a memo to myself about what makes my question a hard one to resolve." **Note:** "I'm going to work on my paper for five hours between lunch and dinner" is neither specific nor observable.

3. Find a pen that makes writing irresistibly fun.

4. Find a notebook that makes writing irresistibly fun.

5. If you usually compose on paper, try composing at the computer – and vice versa. Many people find that they write more fluidly at a keyboard. Many people find that pen and paper work better for some parts of their writing process and that composing at the keyboard works better for other parts of their writing process. Experiment to learn your own preferred mode(s) of composing.

6. Find a writing partner. Set up a schedule of regular meeting times (much as you would with a running partner). When you write alongside someone else, you might find you can work for longer, or with more focus than you would on your own. When you can't get together, email one another about your work-in-progress.

7. Write in a comfortable, quiet place reserved only for that purpose at a time reserved only for that purpose.

8. Write at a table or desk, not on a bed or couch or in an easy chair. When your body is reclining, your mind tends to do the same.

9. When you do things – even small things such as freewriting for ten to fifteen minutes or having a conversation with an instructor or friend about an idea for a paper – keep some record of what you learned or what you were thinking about. One person we know even jots himself little notes about his reading (e.g., a sentence or two about what he "got" from reading a chapter; a note to himself to remember to freewrite on a question that occurred to him as he was reading or doing the dishes). This is called giving yourself credit for things done and for thoughts about things yet to be done; it can go a long way toward helping you feel that you are making headway on writing your paper.

10. When all the good work strategies in the world do you no good, it's important to ask what purpose procrastination is serving in your life. Assume for a moment that procrastination is a very good and creative solution to some problem or concern you have. What is the problem or concern to which procrastination is a good answer? How is procrastination actually working for you? Assume that you are, on some level, choosing to procrastinate. How might that be a good choice? And what is at stake for you – in other words, what would you risk or lose if you were to engage and get things done in a timely way? If you are curious to understand how procrastination might serve you and to consider whether and how you want to change the way you approach your writing, you might want to talk with an academic counselor.

For instance, sometimes we avoid starting early because we believe that if we do, we will write a better-than-usual paper, and that then we will be expected to keep doing such exceptional work, which will mean we will always have to start early, which will mean that we will never play or rest again. We fear that we will be stuck on a hamster wheel of constant work and no play.

Or we fear that if we start early, we will do no better on the paper than we usually do. While we have been saying to ourselves all along that we could do better if we just put in the time, we are afraid to put that claim to the test. We fear that that if we don't write a better-than-usual paper when we give it more time, that will prove that we are an intellectual lightweight and that no amount of work can redeem us.

^{*}The notion of specific, observable steps is drawn from Jane Burka and Lenore Yuen, authors of *Procrastination: Why You Do It, What to Do About It*. The term "S-O-S strategy" is attributable to Sheila M. Reindl of the Bureau of Study Counsel of Harvard University.

Or, in our heart of hearts, we might have decided just how much of our time a paper is worth. We might feel guilty if we started early and still gave the paper only that much time. We would feel beholden to keep working on it up until the due date lest we feel guilty for deciding it was worth only so much of our time. Working last minute ensures that we will not give the paper more time than we privately feel it is worth to us and spares us the guilt of proactively making our own judgment of what a piece is worth.

For some of us, our procrastination is rooted in our experience of our family – tied to our sense of loyalty and betrayal, belonging and separateness, self-determination and disappointment. We might be conflicted about giving something our all, or taking pride in our creative efforts. For some of us, procrastination can be a symptom of a mental health condition such as depression, an anxiety disorder, or Attention Deficit Disorder. In any event, it can be helpful to talk with a professional about your experience of procrastination.

❖ **LIMITING BELIEF #10: *"I have to do the assignment I was given. I can't do what interests me."***

Alternative Assumption:

Assignments can be negotiated. Our instructors have a right to design the assignment as they wish. But we have a right to ask whether there is room to negotiate an assignment that would feel particularly useful and meaningful to us given what we want to learn, what we want to know.

New Approach:

Talk with your instructor. You might be surprised to discover that you would be delighted to negotiate a new topic with you. If you can point to specific questions and issues that interest you from your reading or from lecture, your professor or section leader might be happy to help you pursue your interest.

❖ **LIMITING BELIEF #11: *"I have to start by making an outline."***

Alternative Assumptions:

1. We don't necessarily need to make an outline. Outlines can be useful. But not everyone works with an outline, and even those who do make outlines use them in different ways and at different points in the writing process. Some people use them near the beginning as a way to organize (group) and structure (sequence) their ideas. Others use outlines later in the process to consider and create the organization and structure of their ideas.
2. Regardless of whether and when we use an outline, we will want to find our own way of being able to see the design and trace the movement of our essay. We need to experiment to see what works for us.

New Approaches:

1. Think in terms of **one big question** to which your paper is a response. (See New Approaches #2 and #3 under Limiting Belief #5.) Once you have your big question, you can think of the subordinate questions you will need to address in the service of addressing the big question.
2. Consider the following kinds of in-the-middle-of-the-writing-process outlines:
 - a. **Significance/meaning outline:** This is a sentence outline in which you ask yourself what in each paragraph is significant: What do I want the reader to "get" from this paragraph? How do I want the reader to connect this idea to the larger point? This is particularly helpful for those times when you find yourself including lots of information or background but not really helping your reader see what to make of all that information or background.
 - b. **Function outline:** A paragraph can function in a number of ways: as an assertion, an explanation, a description, an elaboration, an anecdote, evidence, a concession, an amplification, an example, a connection to a larger point, a setting out of the problem, a clarification, a definition. With this outline, you state what a paragraph does (what function it serves) and, in as few words as possible, what the paragraph means. This outline helps you see what function a paragraph is trying to serve, whether it's serving it, whether it's needed at all, and where it fits best.

c. **Question outline:** We can look at each paragraph or chunk of paragraphs as a response to an implicit (sometimes explicit) question. With this outline, you attempt to phrase that question. What question is this paragraph a response to? Because questions tend to establish a pecking order or nesting order (i.e. like Russian dolls), they can help you see the sequence and hierarchy of your ideas. Because questions tend to generate more questions, this outline can suggest new paths of exploration. You might ask the following sorts of questions: Does this idea hold in all cases? What are the exceptions? Are there assumptions or implications I need to consider? What questions does this paragraph raise that I've not considered?

❖ **LIMITING BELIEF #12:** *"I am more focused/creative/productive when I work at the last minute."*

Alternative Assumptions:

1. When we say we claim that we work better at the last minute, we might in fact be right. It could well be true that we are more focused/creative/productive when we work with the intensity of last-minute pressure. If we work best under pressure, we could consider letting ourselves off the hook. Rather than feel guilty for procrastinating, we might let ourselves do what works for us.
2. We might acknowledge that even though the last-minute method has its advantages for us – in terms of focus and productivity and in terms of limiting the sheer number of hours of our life that we devote to a project – it is too costly for us emotionally and physically because we end up pumping adrenaline all night and being exhausted for days afterward. We might also hold in mind that one of the potential costs of working last minute is an increased risk of misusing sources, whether intentionally or unintentionally. (Most of us are aware that plagiarism is considered a serious academic matter and is typically met with serious consequences.) Students who have plagiarized others' work commonly report that their misuse of sources occurred in the context of a last-minute rush; either knowingly, out of desperation, or inadvertently, out of sloppiness, they ended up misrepresenting others' work as their own.

New Approaches:

1. You might try some of the approaches in this handout to see if you can prime the pump earlier. If you start earlier, you might not be as efficient a writer in the short run, but you might work better in the long run. You might find that in the long run you are more actively engaged in your intellectual and creative work because an extended creative process is less painful than a last-minute sprint; you are therefore less likely to avoid writing and so less likely to find your energies sapped by anxiety, guilt, and regret. You might even discover that you enjoy aspects of a more extended writing process – being more playful with your creative process; giving good ideas a chance to mull, "age," and "breathe"; reckoning with more complex arguments; incorporating others' feedback; being more precise in your thinking.
2. If you do start earlier, you might in fact miss some of the rush, drama, intense focus, and high efficiency of your last-minute process. It's okay to miss what you miss.

Prompted Freewriting

Sometimes freewriting works better with a focus or a running start. Consider using the following questions and sentence stems as prompts for your freewriting. Complete the sentence and continue writing from there.

1. When I started this project, the thing that really interested me was . . .
2. The questions I find myself thinking about these days are questions like . . .
3. What I really want to know is . . .
4. I want to figure out how . . .

5. I have a hunch that . . .
6. I am confused by . . .
7. I feel angered or annoyed by . . .
8. What stands out to me about all the stuff I've been reading is this idea that . . .
9. What I've been reading makes me wonder . . .
10. Dialogue between me and the experts (this exercise comes from writing teacher Eileen Farrell):
 - This author/professor/theorist/expert says . . .
 - And/but I say . . .
 - He or she also says . . .
 - And/but I say . . .
11. If I had to put my project/paper so far into the form of a single question, it would be . . .
12. The observations I make that lead me to pose that question are . . .
13. What makes my question hard to reckon with or difficult to resolve is that . . .
14. One way in which I could attempt to reckon with that difficulty of how to resolve my question is . . .
15. If things were as neat and tidy as I'd like them to be, I would be able to make the argument that . . .
16. One way in which things aren't so neat and tidy is that . . .
17. One way in which I might address that messiness is . . .
18. I'm stuck. I'm stuck because I can't figure out . . .
19. I can see that my way of approaching my question has some real problems, or at least challenges, including . . .
20. One way I could possibly address that methodological/approach/design issue is . . .
21. I realize I need to define some terms. If I were to try to define the term _____, what occurs to me is that . . .
22. [A letter to a friend or to your reader] Dear _____, I'm trying to write this paragraph/section/chapter about _____. And do you know what? . . .
23. Let me state what I think I know so far, even if it seems obvious or self-evident (in the belief that sometimes it's actually easy to overlook the obvious and that sometimes the seemingly obvious deserves another look):
24. Of all these seemingly obvious, self-evident things, the one that keeps catching my attention is . . .
25. If I think of "theory" as simply another word for "explanation," I would say that one of the explanations that people have offered for the thing I'm researching is that . . .
26. But that theory or explanation doesn't seem to account for . . .
27. If I could say what I really want to say, . . .
28. If I could approach this project in the way I really want to, . . .
29. If I could write about the question that really interests me, . . .
30. What I wish I could convey to my audience is . . .

Sources and Resources

- Berthoff, A. 1981. *The making of meaning: Metaphors, maxims and models for writing teachers*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann Educational Books.
- Bolker, J. 1998. *Writing your dissertation in fifteen minutes a day: A guide to starting, revising, and finishing your doctoral thesis*. New York: Owl Books.
- Burka, J. and Yuen, L. 1983. *Procrastination: Why you do it, what to do about it*. Reading, MA: Addison Wesley.
- Elbow, P. 1973. *Writing without teachers*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 1981. *Writing with power: Techniques for mastering the writing process*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Goldberg, N. 1986. *Writing down the bones: Freeing the writer within*. Boston: Shambhala

- _____. 1990. *Wild mind: Living the writer's life*. New York: Bantam Books.
- Jeffers, Susan. 2006. *Feel the fear and do it anyway*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Lipson, A. and Reindl, S. 2003. The responsible plagiarist: Understanding students who misuse sources. *About Campus*, 8 (3), 7-14.
- Loehr, J. and Schwartz, T. 2003. *The power of full engagement: Managing energy, not time, is the key to high performance and personal renewal*. New York: Free Press (Simon and Schuster).
- Tharp, T. 2003. *The creative habit: Learn it and use it for life*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

August 2012, August 2015, August 2016