

EXERCISE 3—WRITE QUICKLY, EDIT SLOWLY

TIME NEEDED: 10 minutes x session

MATERIALS NEEDED: Timer

This week's exercise will allow you to practice an important principle for productive writing: *separating the generating from the editing*. Generating a written text requires creativity and involves activating specific mechanisms in our brains. Editing text, on the other hand, is an analytical and repetitive action, requiring attention to detail. **Editing invokes brain mechanisms distinct from those used in creative tasks.** The brain is an amazingly complex system, capable of handling myriad intricate jobs (Medina, 2008). Even so, it doesn't perform very well when trying to handle two tasks requiring focused attention, such as **generating and editing**, simultaneously (so much for the notion of multitasking!).

Many people complain of writer's block because they attempt to generate and edit at the same time. They want the first sentence they write to be *the perfect sentence*! And so they wait . . . and sit . . . and stare at their screens . . . hoping for the one perfect sentence to bubble up, somehow, from a fountain of wisdom buried deep, somewhere. It rarely—if ever—happens. They **continue to wait, sit, and stare**, sometimes for hours! Frustration then settles in; the fixed mindset/belief "*I can't write!*" takes over. Peter Elbow (1998)—the writing theoretician I mentioned in Chapter 1—calls this "the dangerous method: trying to write it right the first time" (p. 39).

Writers who heed Elbow's warning and separate generating from editing fare much better. They write more and don't experience writer's block, compared with those who try to tackle both editing and generating at the same time. Therefore, the exercise for this week aims at having you practice separating generative writing (the capturing of words, thoughts, and ideas) from editing.

So . . . begin by setting your timer for 5 minutes. For these first 5 minutes, write all the thoughts tumbling in your mind. The requirement, here, is the following: *Write as fast as you can*, without stopping. Don't allow your fingers to stop typing at any time; don't lift your pen/pencil from the writing pad at all for the entire 5 minutes.

If you write on a computer, you may want to minimize your file so you don't see what you are typing and don't feel tempted to backtrack in order

to correct misspellings, change words, redo punctuation. These small tasks will derail your thoughts and cause you to switch between the two tasks—the generating and the editing—and this switch has a *cost* (Mayr & Kliegl, 2000): It takes longer. You want to avoid this, completely.

You may write about anything on your mind at the moment, or you may write all the thoughts you've been accumulating related to your current writing project. The principle, here, is to generate a lot of words by capturing all those random thoughts twirling around in your head. You don't want to stop and think about what to write; you want to write in order to *see* what's on your mind.

The rules, then, for the exercise are these: Write as fast as you can, capture as many loose thoughts as possible, and don't worry (or even think) about mistakes, appropriate language, spelling, grammar, or punctuation. That's why it's highly recommended you don't see your words while you're generating them; you'll have plenty of time to look at them during the editing phase.

When your 5 minutes are up, STOP. Reset your alarm for another 5 minutes and focus on cleaning up the mess you just created. You might

- look for good ideas to develop or rescue from the mess,
- place all similar ideas together—like with like,
- organize the text (move sentences around to make more sense), or
- generate a few more sentences to complement what you have.

This is an exercise you should slowly transfer into your daily writing sessions. As you become more comfortable with it, plan for splitting your writing sessions into two more or less equal portions. Use the first portion to generate only; then edit during the second period.

As your text matures, you'll be increasing the time spent editing while decreasing the time spent generating. But keep in mind the process is iterative, because editing will quite frequently require that you generate a few more words, rewrite a few sentences, or add connecting phrases.

A *variation on this exercise* you may want to try later, after you've practiced the one above for at least a week, is this: Instead of splitting each writing session into two portions (one for generating and one for editing), use various sessions only for generating, then several subsequent sessions only for editing. I know this method as the "fast writing, slow editing" process. It is described in an article written by Elena A. Mikhailova and Linda B. Nilson (2007) titled "Developing Prolific Scholars: The 'Fast Article Writing' Methodology."

Tip for ESL Writers

Try to generate your text in English (if you're writing for an English-speaking audience). As you write quickly, nonstop, however, you may not remember certain words or phrases in English. No problem: Write them in your native language. Later, during the editing phase, you can translate the text into English.

What is important? That you capture your thoughts and reasoning about the topic. It doesn't matter if, while you're capturing them, the text comes out garbled, messy, incoherent, grammatically incorrect, or in a mix of two or three languages! You can *always* come back and clean up the messy text. But if you don't capture that idea you had a few minutes ago, it may be gone for a while—or, worse, lost forever!