

classroom. In an office, a tutoring center can be established at a table or desk that writer and tutor can move to as necessary, or a tutor can have an L- or U-shaped desk with one "arm" reserved for working with the writers who approach. At home, although the kitchen table is probably the favorite place, a separate table or desk can be set up if space allows. There are two last considerations that apply to all tutoring environments: The tutor should sit next to the writer or both should sit at a corner so that both can see the draft, and, whenever possible, a computer should be nearby so that on-screen tutorials are a possibility.

Chapter Five

Tutoring When the Writer Does Not Have a Draft

Sometimes a writer needs help with the writing from ground zero, because he has only the jumbled beginnings of a draft, has not gotten anything written down yet, or has no idea what to write about. The tutor's primary role at this stage is to provide expert help with pre-drafting or prewriting. This chapter suggests a variety of questions the tutor can ask and a variety of strategies she can suggest as she guides the writer through discovering a subject to write about, elaborating on the newly discovered subject with information and ideas, and shaping the information and ideas into the beginnings of a draft.

When a Writer Needs Help Finding a Topic

Tutor Questions

- What's the assignment?
- Do you have a subject? [If the writer answers "no," ask these questions—]
- What have you been thinking or reading about lately?
- What are you curious to know more about?

Strategies

Writing territories. When a writer has no idea what to write about, suggest that he take ten minutes to generate a list of "writing territories" (Atwell 1998)—that is, a personalized, diverse, and specific list of

subjects he has written about already or would like to try writing about, including concerns, memorable incidents, and strong opinions. As Atwell puts it, the items on a writing territories list add up to a writer's "self-portrait." Making such a list enables the writer to brainstorm and explore his own interests, attitudes, and areas of authority—his "territories." (Tom Reigstad's writing territories list is depicted in Figure 5-1.) Then go over the list until you both latch onto an item that is a likely candidate to write further about. Writing territories are similar to Murray's (1984) notion of an "authority list," in which writers brainstorm about things that they are experts in. A nice thing about authority lists and writing territories is that they can be saved and updated periodically, then used as a resource whenever a writer

Figure 5-1

Tom Reigstad's Writing Territories (June 1999)

- the tying a bow dysfunction (a kindergarten problem for male Reigstads . . . or Thank God for Velcro)
- Big 4 basketball—it declined before it barely started
- being an overprotective parent
- the village of Kenmore as "Mayberry, USA"
- memorable snowfalls (including January '99)
- a native Buffalonian living in D.C. . . . Missouri . . . Iowa
- belonging to a book club
- my ex-career as a writing seminar presenter
- impressive business organizations: Saturn; Manhattan Bagel; Target; Stereo Advantage
- the anti-public education pendulum swing: charter schools; budget cuts; taxpayer groups
- what it must be like having parents who are teachers
- why anyone besides gym teachers would become school administrators
- comparing Quality Market and Tops: a sociologist's dream, down to the cat food
- whatever happened to McDonald's efficiency
- playing pick-up ball as a kid
- adult rituals of softball and basketball
- the struggle and obsession to be physically fit
- what the Army was able to teach a 22-year-old with a master's degree and an attitude
- getting your first teaching job at the high school you graduated from

shows up for a tutoring session not knowing what to write about.

Free writing. An excellent technique for helping the writer get something down on paper is to ask her to write for ten minutes about anything that pops into her head. She must write without stopping, without going back to correct anything. If she can't think of anything, she should keep writing the words "I can't think of anything to write" until something else jumps in. This exercise, popularized by Peter Elbow (1981), liberates the writer from her internal critic and allows pure discovery of thought on paper (or computer terminal screen). After ten minutes, look at the results together and pick out intriguing ideas or attractive, surprising phrases that might form the basis of a thesis for a full paper.

Figure 5-1, continued

- the romance and reality of being a writer/editor at the Courier-Express
- the accidental teacher
- the physical and psychological traces of a Norwegian bloodline
- confessions of a snack food king
- our life with Portia the Christmas cat
- how two boys—Luke and Leif—can be so alike, yet so different
- my Dad as hero—one special day of unloading incredibly heavy office furniture at UB and then pitching an entire baseball game; taking on the Big C
- on avoiding writing
- on avoiding high school reunions
- the feeling of a Buffalo native who feels rootless
- the pull of a Protestant upbringing (the inexplicable desire to sing all 8 verses of the old-time hymns) while of necessity attending Catholic church
- my preference for reading nonfiction and aversion to drama
- getting caught innocently in the beanie baby craze
- the greed of garage sales
- is it possible to get through Flag Day ceremonies or Memorial Day parades without choking up?
- the constant noise assault of power tools in Kenmore—some places around the country have zones preventing leaf blowers
- cell phone abuse (Blockbuster story; cars) and backlash (phone rage—Japan has no cell phone areas)
- why do TV Guides have to be collectible?

Rapid sketches. Another useful brainstorming technique is the rapid sketch. As described by Donald Graves (1996), the writer begins by taking about four minutes to make a list of what has transpired in his life over the last two or three days, then looks over the list and chooses one item to write more about for another five minutes. Graves emphasizes that the writer should adhere to these guidelines: Write rapidly, change nothing, lower your standards. Rereading one rapid sketch (or a series of them) helps the writer become sensitive to issues in his own life that are worth exploring.

Conversation. Don't overlook the power of simply engaging in natural conversation with the writer, bantering back and forth about mutual interests such as music, sports, or current political events. The writer may make a connection with a problem you have or an author you admire or a brand of sneaker you prefer—and seize on it as something interesting to write about. As you talk over possible topics with the writer, try Atwell's (1998) suggestion of scribbling snippets of the conversation on sticky notes so that the writer has a rough record of this productive oral brainstorming to use later.

Free talking. Free talking isn't quite the oral counterpart of free writing, but a sequence of steps devised by Robert Zoellner (1969) to combine oral and written brainstorming so that a writer gradually narrows down a manageable topic. Ask the writer to brainstorm ideas aloud for ten minutes, recording her talk on an audiotape, then to play back the tape and transcribe relevant portions. Have the writer then talk about and elaborate on the transcription, continuing to record, then play that second taping and extract salient points and write them down. This talk-write-retalk-rewrite sequence should move the writer from sheer brainstorming toward focused consideration of a subject.

Doodling or sketching. Author Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1984) once commented that his interest in writing was cultivated by drawing cartoons: "Before I could read or write I used to draw cartoons at school and at home . . . in the genesis of all my books there's always an image." Marquez even compiled a collection of photographs that he referred to for beginning points in his writing projects. Visual thinking can help verbal thinking. Ask the writer to draw or sketch something as he lets his mind wander. He may notice a theme or pattern developing in the doodle, which can prove to be a starting point for writing that is a personal reflection or attitude. Graves (1994) reminds us of the special place that drawing has for children as a warm-up to writing. He has observed that children use their drawings as a rehearsal for the written text that follows.

Figure 5-2
3 x 5 Card Exercise

Working for a Moving Company		
skins	come-along	carry
pads	Johnny bar	roll-a-life machines
overseas crates	reefer dolly	weight
packing	palletizing	scale
picking	containerize	Anjon's
base	crate	out-of-towner
dolly	mats	estimate
two-wheeler	cartons	long haul
four-wheeler	tape guns	piano board
Anjon's		
Two Trip Breakfast		attractive to drivers
Country Breakfast specials (\$1.55)		Joe K.'s 4 sandwiches
slow service (surprisingly)		Walden Ave.
not crowded		coffee
friendly waitress		juice
cheap		toast
lunch specials		2 eggs
huge parking lot		home fries

Anjon's restaurant on Walden near Transit is a popular breakfast and lunch eatery for truckers. Although this truck stop might lack good food and fast service, it makes up for it in friendly waitresses, a cheap menu, and that most valuable commodity for tractor trailer drivers—ample parking space. My two dining experiences there have been mixed. The two breakfast specials I've ordered—including coffee, juice (in a thimble-like glass), two eggs, toast, and home fries—for \$1.55, have been average. But the waitresses have made it pleasant by joking with me and my fellow workers/diners. In fact, when one crewman ordered four grilled cheese sandwiches for lunch one day, the cook even came out to kid him about his appetite.

Composing Exercise

Complete each of the following steps on a separate three-by-five card. A sample response to each step is given on the facing page.

Step 1. Think of an experience, a person, or a place and list 20–25 specific details (words, phrases, impressions) about it on Card 1.

Step 2. Circle the most interesting or surprising detail on Card 1. On Card 2, provide more information about what you have circled. Drive yourself to make this new list of short specific details as long as possible.

Step 3. Use the list of details on Card 2 to write whole sentences, actually a rough draft, on Card 3. Put the information you assembled on Card 2 into a meaningful order on Card 3. Look for patterns among the specific details, ways to link them together, and ways to organize them. Turn the details into sentences.

Step 4. Edit and proofread Card 3. Correct grammar, usage, spelling, and punctuation. If necessary, recopy what you have written.

Three-by-five card exercise. This activity helps the writer not only to brainstorm possible subjects, but to narrow her thinking down to one subject and get started writing on it. Figure 5-2 illustrates this exercise.

Heightening the writer's alertness. Sometimes a tutor can help a writer find a topic by keeping her writer's antennae attuned to possibilities in the world around her. Writers need a reminder, a jog, to tell them how rich and varied their own lives are. They need to become more aware of the unique hidden in the mundane, especially where least expected. You might share this anecdote of how E. L. Doctorow (1988) came to write *Ragtime*: He was facing the wall of his study in New Rochelle, New York, as he sat groping for ideas. Desperate, he started to write about the wall, which led to writing about the house, which had been built in 1906. Those jottings progressed to a description of the era and became the beginning of a novel. You might also pass on the advice of Verlyn Klinkenborg (1992), who implores writers to "brood," to be in a constant state of writing readiness by being open to the surprise appearance of an internal writing episode popping into their daily routines: "The capacity for editing sentences in your head while waiting in a supermarket line is eminently useful." Tom Brown (1983) teaches writers who are out in the field to use "spatervision" to increase their observation of features of nature. Rather than focusing on particular objects, the writer lets her eyes glaze over slightly and tries to take in everything within a wide half-circle. Brown also suggests several sighting and journal-writing activities to help writers become more alert to discovering new things in familiar landscapes.

When a Writer Has a Topic, But No Draft

Tutor Questions

- What's the assignment?
- Do you have a subject? [If the writer answers "yes," ask the following questions—]
- What do you know about the subject?
- What don't you know about the subject?
- How can you look for connections among the tidbits that you already know that might suggest new directions?

Strategies

Cubing. *Cubing* teaches the writer to approach a subject from six perspectives (like the six sides of a cube):

1. Describe the subject by jotting down ideas about its color, shape, size, origin, parts, and makeup.
2. Compare the subject to something else—what is it like or unlike?
3. Associate the subject with other things by making personal connections.
4. Analyze the subject by responding to questions like: How is it made? How are its parts related? Where is it going? Where did it come from?
5. Apply the subject by writing about what can be done with it, or what uses it has.
6. Argue for or against the subject by choosing a side and defending it.

Twenty questions. Teach the writer to ask the right questions and jot down responses to the questions as she explores their subject. Figure 5-3 shows a handy list of twenty questions that the writer can run through systematically to generate ideas about the subject (substitute the subject for "X" on the list). Note that not every question will be relevant to a given subject.

Particle/wave/field perspectives. The writer can apply the subject to a series of prompts devised by Richard Young, Alton Becker,

Figure 5-3

Twenty Questions

1. How is X different from things in your personal experience?
2. What does X mean?
3. How is X made or done?
4. X used to be _____, but now is _____.
5. Where does X occur or appear?
6. What is the primary function of X?
7. Why does X occur?
8. What does X cause or influence?
9. What are the consequences of X?
10. What are the types of X?
11. How does X compare with Y?
12. How is X different from things in your vicarious experience?
13. How is X different from what you expected?
14. What is the present status of X?
15. What kind of person is X?
16. What is the value of X?
17. When does X occur?
18. What happens just before/after X?
19. What is likely to be true of X in the future?
20. What case can be made for/against X?

and Kenneth Pike (1970). Viewing the subject from three perspectives can help uncover areas to write about that might otherwise have been overlooked. This system prompts the writer to look at the subject in terms of *particles* (as if it were static), *waves* (as if it were dynamic), and *fields* (as if it were a network of relationships). Young, Becker, and Pike's prompts include these:

Particle: What are the subject's contrastive features? How much can the subject vary before becoming something else? How should it be classified?

Wave: What physical features distinguish the subject from similar objects or events? How is it changing? How does it interact with and merge into its environment?

Field: How are the subject's components organized in relation to one another and in time and space? How do particular instances of the system vary? What is the subject's position in the larger system?

Burke's pentad. Kenneth Burke (1945) devised a five-part question-asking activity that is especially useful to writers examining human motivation in terms of actions and their results. If you're working with a writer who needs to compose a profile or a response to a literary character, having the writer take notes on the pentad questions can be very productive:

Act: What was done?

Scene: When or where was it done?

Agent: Who did it?

Agency: How did he or she do it? What means or instruments were used?

Purpose: Why did she or he do it?

Looping. Looping allows writers to explore in writing what they know about a subject, to stop and reflect on what they just wrote, and then to write further based on their new understanding (Elbow 1981). Ask the writer to spend from five to ten minutes writing whatever he knows about the subject, then to read the writing over and compose a single sentence that expresses the most important idea in it. That sentence then becomes the focus of another five-to-ten-minute directed free writing, which again is read over, reflected on, and summarized in a sentence. This cycle may take place as many as three times, at which point the writer should have enough understanding of the subject to be able to settle on a focus.

Titles. Some writers who have a subject in hand find it helpful to formulate several possible titles before starting a draft, which is a way to establish parameters for the paper. In his days as a freelance writer, Murray (1995) would start writing an article by brainstorming from a hundred to a hundred and fifty possible titles: "Each title was a window into the draft I might write." Share Murray's recommendations and those of others (Herrscher 1995; Meyer 1988) who describe title-writing as an indispensable method of narrowing a subject. Recommend the following possibilities to nudge the writer toward experimenting and fishing for titles:

1. Write a title that is a question beginning with "how" or "why."
2. Write a title that is a question beginning with "is" or "are," "do" or "does," or "will."
3. Write a title that begins with an "-ing" verb.
4. Write a title that begins with "on."
5. Write a one-word title.
6. Write a two-word title.
7. Think of a familiar saying, or the title of a book, song, or movie that might fit the subject you are going to write about, then twist it by changing a word or creating a pun on it.
8. Find two titles that you have jotted down that you might use together in a double title (title and subtitle), then join them with a colon.

Clustering. Ask the writer to write her topic in the middle of a sheet of paper and circle it; then write ideas related to that subject, circle them, and connect them to the main circle; then write ideas related to those ideas, circle them, and join them to the relevant ideas; and so on.

Point-of-view mapping. Murray (1984) suggests this vehicle to help writers find a focus by moving around the subject and taking the quick notes about the place from which the subject is observed. The writer writes the subject in the middle of a sheet of paper; jots down various points of view that might provide different perspectives and sources of information about the subject in a circle around the subject; then draws an arrow from each point of view to the subject in the middle. This gives the writer, with a quick glance, various points from which he may view the subject. (As discussed in the next chapter, you can recommend other kinds of mapping activities once the writer has a draft in progress.)

When a Writer Has a Partial Draft

After successfully steering a writer through the tricky waters of brainstorming with or without a subject, you will probably be called upon to help her incorporate some of the materials she has gathered into the beginnings of a draft.

Leads. One way to put the drafting process in motion is to show writers how to formulate the journalistic *lead*. Garrison (1985) suggests eleven leads tutors should be familiar with: anecdote, startling statement, narrative, summary, quotation, question, description, general statement, analogy, statement of purpose, and news lead. If the writer has difficulty starting to write or has written portions of a discovery draft, run through these leads until one strikes the writer as a useful hook to hang the draft onto.

Repeating a key word. Once the inertia of beginning a draft is overcome, encourage the writer to sustain the flow at all costs. One technique we described in an earlier monograph (Reigstad and McAndrew 1984) teaches the writer to force the draft along by building each sentence around a key word or phrase from the previous sentence. This device may not produce the best writing, but it keeps the draft rolling, which is the crucial objective. Consider the paragraph below. The writer got stuck after the third sentence, but by repeating a key word (underlined) was able to push through temporary writer's block and move on to the next sentence—and the next—until a more natural rhythm was regained.

Hjemkomst means "homecoming" in Norwegian. And that's exactly what the aptly-named American-built replica of a Viking ship did during the summer of 1982. The ship was handmade in Duluth and began its transatlantic trip from Knife River, Minnesota, on Lake Superior in May. From Knife River, the Hjemkomst longship sailed through the Great Lakes, with stops in Detroit, Cleveland and Buffalo. The ship left the Great Lakes at the Erie Barge Canal and proceeded to New York City. From New York, the crew launched the last leg of its trip home to Bergen, Norway. The 76 1/2-foot, square-sail vessel completed the 3,500 mile voyage triumphantly in mid-July, but not until experiencing several harrowing episodes.

Framing. If identifying an opening line and keeping the draft rolling present challenges for writers, finding an appropriate exit can be even more difficult. Be alert to the possibilities of *framing* when a logical closing to a draft is not apparent. Framing links the conclusion and opening of a draft by returning to a word, image, theme, or impres-

sion that was mentioned in the lead. This device both helps the writer and leaves the reader with a pleasing sense of closure. In the conclusion of his essay about novelist Ken Kesey, Henry Allen's (1975) echoing of the opening is descriptive of the setting and weather, but most particularly of Kesey's hat:

Opening: Ah, yes, feeding the cows. Ken Kesey, at 38, all genial and hulking in his dungaree jacket, his big, tough Buddha face goofy under an ear-flapped green-and-yellow knut cap, strides out through the pasture mud to feed his 26 beef cows, a bale of hay sagging from each hand.

Closing: Kesey tugs on his onion-spire, ear-flapped, Tibetan-style green-and-yellow knut cap, and they rush out into the rain.

Tutoring Strategies for Preventing Writer's Block

- Be sure that the writer doesn't edit prematurely. Blocked writers often interrupt the flow of their writing by fussing too early with elements like comma placement or spelling.
- Help the writer "break out" and take risks (see the discussion of "Grammar B" in Chapter 8). Writers who follow rigid and inappropriate rules for writing are sometimes plagued by self-consciousness and inertia.
- Suggest that a writer make a writing appointment with herself (literally, in her weekly planning calendar) and keep it.
- On in-depth writing projects, urge the writer to write as many parts of the project as possible early on (boilerplate stuff, for example). When you help writers to write early, creating the final version is a matter of fitting completed parts together, which is a much less intimidating job than assembling an entire first draft from start to finish.
- Suggest that a reluctant writer use a warm-up ritual. Most productive writers rely on habits to get them started. Ernest Hemingway sharpened twenty pencils. Thornton Wilder took a long walk. Michael Crichton eats a particular meal, a different one for each book.
- If a writer is struggling, recommend switching tools. If his fingers are motionless at the computer keyboard, he might open up by using a pad and pencil instead (or vice versa).