What Is Writing For?

By John Edlund

You probably hate writing. Or more specifically, you hate writing for school. You probably do a lot of writing on social media and texting on your phone, and you enjoy that. Why is that writing different from school writing? You do the non-school writing because you enjoy it, because it expresses your ideas and feelings, and because it connects you to your friends and family. Also, you do it because you choose to. It is your own free will. School writing is assigned.

Why do we have school writing? It is supposed to prepare you for a life beyond school. It is a way to practice more professional forms of writing that you wouldn't normally encounter in high school. Does it always do that well? It depends. We will get back to that.

I know that many of you think that school writing is writing and the rest of the writing you do is not *real* writing because it doesn't have to have paragraphs or use correct grammar. However, all writing has an audience and a purpose. It's just that when you are writing text messages to friends and family it comes naturally because you know your audience well and you know exactly why you are writing.

Literacy

What we are really talking about here is *literacy*, the ability to represent spoken language in combinations of letters that form words and sentences. Face-to-face spoken language conveys a lot of extra information about what the speaker means through tone, facial expressions, and gestures. When we write, we lose those extra features so the words and punctuation have to carry more of the meaning themselves. That is part of why writing is harder than speaking. We have to choose our words carefully.

Another factor is that when we are speaking to someone, we can tell if they understand what we are saying by their reaction to our words. We get immediate feedback. We can tell if it makes them angry or happy or bored, and if we don't like the reaction, we can try to correct it. When we write something, the reader might not be in front of us, so we don't know their reaction and we can't change what we said to help them understand.

Literacy was invented thousands of years ago. From the beginning it has been controversial. In Plato's dialog *Phaedrus*, Socrates tells the story of two Egyptian gods, Theuth and Thamus, arguing about the value of literacy. Theuth has invented writing, which he says "will make the Egyptians wiser and give them better memories." Thamus disagrees. He says literacy "will create forgetfulness in the learners' souls, because they will not use their memories; they will trust to the external written characters and not remember of themselves."

Do you think this is true? Do illiterate people remember important things better than people who can write things down?

Thamus also says that written words do not provide truth, but only something that looks like truth. He says that readers "will be hearers of many things and will have learned nothing; they will appear to be omniscient and will generally know nothing; they will be tiresome company, having the show of wisdom without the reality." In other words, book learning is not the same as real learning. Is

this even more true of the internet today? (For the complete myth of Thamus see<https://www.john-uebersax.com/plato/myths/phaedrus.htm>)

We also have to remember that the only reason that we can think about Plato's ideas today is that he wrote them down and we have scholars who can translate ancient Greek. He wrote this little anti-literacy story to make us think hard about the advantages and disadvantages of literacy. I don't think he expects us to give it up. However, are there people among us who try to look like they know a lot, but are actually not very wise? Is he right about that?

The truth is, writing is very, very useful. Even a grocery list is useful. We have all gone to the store thinking we will remember what we need, but come home without the most important item. Our whole society is built on literacy. It seems natural and is expected. It used to be that only the rich and privileged were literate, but now society expects everyone to be.

Has this expectation of literacy been changed by technology? Yes, of course. We can access video instructions if we need help doing something. We can have remote meetings on video chat platforms. We can even talk to each other on our phones. However, at the present moment, all of this technology is supported and maintained through literacy. We still text each other. We need letters and numbers to set up our phones and computers. We still read signs and prices. Programmers still write code. Will there come a time in the future when literacy is no longer necessary and everything can be done through icons and speech? It could be, but if that happens, there will still be programmers behind the scenes making the technology work.

However, beyond writing as an aid to memory and as a means to communicate with others over distance and time, writing is a way of externalizing your thoughts so that you can think about them with a little objectivity. In your head, it is hard to keep all of your ideas together as a sensible whole. You can't think all of your ideas at once! If you start writing them down, you can look at them, think about them, connect them, and share them, if you want to.

Sometimes, you don't even know what you think about something, and most of us reject good ideas before we have adequately considered them. This is where a process called "freewriting" can be helpful.

Freewriting

Freewriting is a strategy invented by writing teacher Ken Macrorie and later promoted heavily by another scholar, Peter Elbow, starting in his book *Writing Without Teachers*. To do it, you set a time limit, perhaps 10 minutes, and just start writing whatever comes to mind. The only rule is that you don't stop. If you can't think of anything to say, you just write, "I can't think of anything to say." You don't worry about grammar, punctuation or sentence structure. You just keep writing. You might think of this as finding out what you are thinking about.

If you already have something you want to write about (or have been assigned to write about), the process is called "focused freewriting." You have a topic in mind, you set your timer, and start writing with the same "no stop" rule. Again, don't worry about grammar, punctuation, or sentence structure.

Most of us try to write, edit, correct, and plan at the same time, even if we know better. When we do this, we often reject perfectly good ideas and never even think of other ones. The brain can't do all of these different operations at once, so we switch back and forth and never develop any momentum or flow. It's painful. We also get committed to the words we have written, even if they are not the best ones, because they were so much work to produce.

Freewriting gets us started without all that pain. The blank page now has some words and ideas on it. Are they brilliant? Probably not, but there might be a gold nugget in there somewhere. Even if there isn't, you've got a start. You know something about what you think.

The Blob

You now have a formless blob of words on the page. It's not an essay. It's not even a paragraph. It's a blob. What's the next step? There are lots of possibilities.

The advantage of a blob is that it has no structure, but it can be formed into different shapes. However, it probably needs some more substance and maybe some bones.

- If there is a nugget of value in it, you could take that nugget and do another focused freewriting on that idea.
- Right now, the audience for the blob is you. If you were going to share the ideas with someone, what would you do to help them understand it? (One way to find out is to share it and ask for feedback.)
- If we think about genre, could it become an essay? A poem? A blog post? A meme or cartoon? What would you add or subtract to move it in one of these directions?
- If you think it needs to get bigger, what would you add?
- Are there some words that you are unhappy with? Can you think of some better ones? Where does that lead your thinking?
- If you were going to divide the blob into two parts, where would you divide it? After dividing would you expand the parts? If so, what would you add?

The blob on the page is something you created. It is something that was in your mind that now is in the world. Now that it is in the world, you can shape it to express your ideas and feelings to others, in different forms, for different people. You have power over it. It is an aspect of your self.

Self-Expression and AI

As I am writing this, it seems the world has gone crazy for AI. Microsoft Office is now full of AI tools that will "help" you write essays, emails, reports, charts, songs, poems, short stories, almost anything you can think of. Apple is introducing similar tools into the iPhone. For humans,writing is hard work, takes time, and is often imperfect. A lot of people are thinking, "Why not just let the AI do all of the hard work?"

The same thing is happening in art and music. It may be that most videos and popular music will soon be created entirely by AI. What will happen to human creators? If Plato were alive today, I think he would write a myth similar to the one he wrote about literacy, but about AI. We have to think carefully about how we use AI.

Earlier in the article, I made a distinction between writing and "school writing." School writing is a kind of practice writing designed to introduce you to types of writing that you do not do in your daily life now, but will probably do later in college, in workplaces, and in other situations. It tends to emphasize format, correct grammar, and correct punctuation. These are things that AI is good at, even in these early stages. You can ask the AI to do the assignment for you and it will probably produce what

appears to be an acceptable result. When it does this, it is referring to millions of similar examples in its training database and assembling a result. You've got something to turn in. However, did you learn anything? Did your writing skills improve? If you go about doing the assignment in this way, the assignment itself is rather pointless, isn't it?

A lot of people erroneously think that good writing is correct writing. It would be better to say that good writing is writing that is effective in accomplishing the purpose the writer has for it. Often, grammatical correctness makes the writing more effective and the AI can probably help with that.

On the other hand, the freewriting blob discussed above came from your own mind. It is an expression of your individual self, not something constructed out of the assembled writings of millions of others. What do want to represent who you are, AI writing or writing that comes from your own heart and brain?

Conclusions

In the near future, it will be almost impossible to avoid using AI-generated content because it will be built into all of the tools we use for writing. However, beginning the process with a focused freewriting ensures that you at least start out with some ideas and words from your own mind. After that, if you want, you can let the AI shape it for your audience and purpose. However, if you do, keep some things in mind.

- Make sure you start out with some idea of what you already think. Some freewriting time can be helpful.
- When the AI makes a suggestion or generates a product, read it carefully. Do you agree with everything in it? Would you be able to answer questions about it? Would any of the ideas embarrass you if a reader thought they were yours?
- Are the facts provided by the AI true? AI programs are known to "hallucinate" or make things up.
- Will the document produced serve your purpose?
- Did you learn anything from doing it?

Let's keep real humans in the process.

<div align="center">Works Cited</div>

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers*, 2nd Ed. Oxford Univ. Press: New York, 1998.

Plato. *Phaedrus*. Plato's Myths: Thamus and Theuth (Phaedrus 274b–278d). https://www.john-uebersax.com/plato/myths/phaedrus.htm. Accessed 13 June 2024.