

Coming Up with Ideas for Writing

In the first chapter of her book *Wild Eyes: Living the Writer's Life* (1990), author Natalie Goldberg writes that the “the beginning of all writing, the foundation of learning [is] to trust your own mind.” Practicing free writing is a way to trust your mind. It’s a way to get out on the page words and ideas that you might not even know are within you.

Some of Goldberg’s rules for free writing are:

- ◆ **“Keep your hand moving .”** When you free write, you are trying to stop the editor within you from telling you that you have no ideas or that what ideas you do have aren’t worthwhile or that your writing must be grammatically correct from the “get go.” Free writing frees your mind, helps ideas to surface that are deep within the waters of yourself. You are going fishing.
- ◆ **“Lose control .”** My daughter was given a writing assignment for high-school AP English for which she was to read a couple of books and then write directed responses to those books. The directions demanded the following: “You must write inside the box only. Any writing outside the box will not be graded.” However, a good writer must begin outside the box. Creativity does not live in a box. Good ideas are not nicely stacked in a file; they are hiding in the shadows, crouching in the crevices. “Say what you want to say,” Goldberg prods. “Don’t worry if it’s correct, polite, or appropriate. Let it rip.” You can shape, correct, polish your writing later, after you have coaxed the ideas from those dark corners of yourself.
- ◆ **“Be specific .”** If you go for what’s really true, you’re going to name names. The car in which you had your first kiss was a 2001 Honda Civic LX, a red coupe; the river where you and your friends made rafts was the Brazos; the tree from which you fell when you were ten was a water oak; the old lady down the street (N. Pearl, by the way) whom you thought was a witch was Mrs. Simpson, and she had a wart on her left cheek that turned red when she caught you stealing plums from her back yard. (You can use pseudonyms if you’re going public later with your writing.)
- ◆ **“Don’t think .”** Let the words come from the physical movement of your hand across the page. Your brain is working even when you aren’t consciously thinking, so let your brain do its work.
- ◆ **“Don’t worry about punctuation, spelling, grammar .”** You can do that later, in the last draft of whatever comes out of your free writing.

- ◆ **“Go for the jugular”**. Remember, in free writing, you are trying to get your ideas out on the page without your internal editor telling you, “that’s not nice; good girls don’t do that.” You can decide later if you would rather not kiss and tell, right before the wonderful story goes to the printer.

Practice free writing

Choose **one** phrase (from ad copy in a women’s clothing catalog, by the way) from the column below and free write on that phrase. Stop after ten minutes, review what you have written, and choose an idea that seems to be coming out of that timed writing. Write that idea down and free write on it again for ten minutes. Stop and reread what you have written. Choose a phrase or an idea or continue a thought from the previous ten minutes of writing. Write ten more minutes on that idea.

lonely nights
after the sun rises
once in a blue moon
I almost forgot
I didn’t know how bad it was
happy day
it almost didn’t happen
does she know
only the best
I wish I didn’t have to
how dark is the sky
I like this most of all
If only I could forget
now we’re even
one day I will
when the stars come out
once I thought

Writing rules from:

Goldberg, Natalie. *Wild Mind: Living the Writer’s Life*. New York: Bantam Books, 1990. 1-4.