

**SESSION TITLE**

# FREE FLOW WRITING

**ACTIVITY IN A SENTENCE:**

A creative way of getting started and finding unique approaches.

**DISCIPLINES INVOLVED IN ACTIVITIES:**

Citizenship and Philosophy

(The workshop can be applied as a creative tool in order to deal with any subject area)

**RECOMMENDED AGES:**

14+

**LEARNING ENVIRONMENT (CONTEXT SETTING):**

Classroom, informal learning space

This activity/method can be applied for two different purposes:

- A) The activity describes a process to find a unique and personal approach to transform a topic, a prompt, an experience or an input into a creative piece of work which deepens the elaboration and serves to start exploring a topic in depth.

Or

- B) This activity can be applied as a method for any context in which students are asked to create a project that engages with their environment on their own. It serves to gather a pool of ideas and find a personal approach that is aligned with their personal interest, stance and concern.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

- Overcoming writer's block or simply getting started with a project
- Attuning to one's personal involvement and interest in a topic
- Finding ideas for a project and editing them afterwards
- Recapitulating after a session of input in order to reflect on the learner's' experience of the class, about its impact and relevance for them, which open questions or further thoughts and/or how to investigate the topic further.
- Demarcation to other brainstorming or ideation methods: The process of free writing does not allow one to stay in a mental mode of full control. Therefore, unexpected and valuable approaches can evolve.
- A) Inputs from activities undertaken by school students with stakeholders engaged in open schooling programs can be "digested" and further developed and converted into the personal projects of the students.

The activity can either serve to create the connection between what is done in school and the experiences that are made together with others or in extraordinary open schooling events – through developing the starting point for creating a “piece” that builds up on the input/experience. This piece can be realised in different mediums: It can be a theatre play, a graphically designed Zine, a stop motion movie, a scientific text or an essay – to list only a few examples of possible final outcomes.

- B) This activity will help students to map the issues that concerns them and their local community and to form the basis for formulating an open schooling project.

### RECOMMENDED EXPERTISE:

No specific expertise is mandatory. Experience in writing or free flow writing can be helpful.

### SDG LINKS:

- **Goal 4:** Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

### TIME IT TAKES TO COMPLETE:

30 – 45 minutes

### MATERIALS / RESOURCES NEEDED:

- A few blank sheets of paper (or notebook) per student
- Pens
- Timer
- Three open questions fitting to the subject matter
- A bell (optional)

### CONTENT FOR LEARNERS:

- *Free Flow Writing Rules*
- *Topic Layout Template A Topic Layout Template B*

### TIPS FOR SCALING FOR DIFFERENT AUDIENCES:

This module makes a creative method of project development accessible to many different disciplines. See examples below.

# Activity

## Introduction: About Free Flow Writing

The technique of Automatic Writing or Free Flow Writing became popular under the name “Écriture automatique” by the Surrealists – an art movement of the 1920s who tried to get into practice by giving up intentional control and connecting to the subconscious. While it can have many forms, the method described here invites

the students to answer three questions posed by the teacher, by writing down whatever comes to their mind after listening to the question for a certain amount of time (approximately 3 – 5 minutes per question). Correct grammar or a good style are not important, and any judgement should be suspended during those few minutes. The exercise can be compared to a so-called brainstorming process, in which all ideas are considered equally valid, so one is also encouraged to write down what could be considered one's 'worst ideas'.

The scope of this exercise is to let one's thoughts evolve during the writing process (not to think about the question first and then write those thoughts down). It is important to keep on writing without pausing or even lifting the pen for too long from the paper, until an acoustic tone (like an alarm bell) signals the end of the writing time. This low-threshold approach not only fills the paper with written text quite quickly and effortlessly, which can help to deal with anxieties around perfectionism or being confronted with a blank page and not knowing how to even get started. It also leads to surprising, unforeseeable outcomes, which helps to connect with one's own innovative creativity and personal (maybe even private) interests in a topic. The written pages stay with the students who decide what they want to do with them – sharing them or keeping them to themselves. The free flow of writing should be followed by a process of sorting out specific ideas and arranging them for the purpose of the class's task.

## Part 1: Let it flow

### 1.1 Introduction of frame and goal

First the students should be introduced to the general project of the class. Does it refer to an activity or input from the past? Or is the goal to develop a new project and find the starting point?

#### *Introduce the output-medium*

The teacher explains what medium it is that the students are going to use to create their outcome – based on the activity described in this guide. This could be a magazine, a fictional story, a documentary, a speech, a multimedia presentation, etc.

For this activity handbook, we will use the example of creating a Zine to the topic "Self-Care" as the output.

The teacher gives insights to the (historical) background, the purpose and use of the selected medium. Some already existing examples can be presented.

#### **LINKS RELATED TO THE EXAMPLE OF ZINES:**

- *What are Zines? Examples of Zines.*
- *What are self-care zines?*

### 1.2 Explain Free Writing

Every student is asked to get a pen, a few sheets of blank paper and a copy of the *Automatic Writing Exercise* with its 'rules' is explained to them as followed:

- "I am going to ask you three questions all in all and for every question you will get ~4 minutes to answer it in written form."
- "Immediately after hearing the question, you should start writing. Don't think about your answer first

and then write it down but try to be in a constant writing flow without thinking too much. This might feel as if your hand or the pen has a life of its own and is writing the answers, not you. So afterwards you might even be surprised what 'you' have written down. Try to never lift the pen from the paper for too long. If you don't know what to write about, just try to keep on writing. You can even write 'I don't know what to write about' or 'blah blah blah' and trust that full sentences will come as if by themselves soon."

- "Mistakes are welcome, as well as weirdness and imperfections. Don't worry about grammar, commas, style, beautiful handwriting or the like. Don't judge or censor what you are writing down – your supposedly worst as well as your best ideas or conclusions are equally important."
- "I am not going to collect your texts or ask you to read it. Whatever you are writing down stays with yourself and you decide what you are going to do with it: keeping it or throwing it away or showing it to somebody – as you wish. Since you are writing only for yourself you don't need to impress anybody or restrict your writing."
- "Your answers can be serious or silly, realistic or fantastic, true or false, authentic or pretending, small or big, humorous or earnest. Wherever your flow leads you to and whatever you find more interesting."

### 1.3 Free Writing

The teacher can then set the timer for 3 – 5 minutes and ask the first question.

- **How to formulate the three questions in dependency of the topic:**

Depending on the topic the three questions for the Free Flow Writing should highlight different perspectives which help the students to dig deeper into the topic by first getting a feeling for its full spectrum, which can also contain contradictions. A typical triple would be to ask about the pro and the contra or the positive and the negative aspects regarding a subject matter and finally about some form of conclusion, synthesis or next steps and actions. One can also ask about easy or pleasurable aspects and then about difficult or problematic ones. The first two questions then serve as some form of overview, while the last question can be about more specific, pragmatic or hands-on aspects in order to collect ideas to get into practice afterwards or in order to see one's personal relevance of the topic.

- **Example: Self-Care Zine:**

In a workshop that aims at creating small handmade magazines about self-care, the writing exercise could help the students to find out what kind of self-care topic is so accessible to them that they could make a whole magazine about it. Here the first question could be about certain problems, worries or difficulties – because the final zine could help to address those problems and investigate how to deal with them. The question (or set of questions which all aim at the same direction that students can choose one from to focus on) could then sound something like:

- First Question: "Ask yourself: 'What has been on your mind lately? What was annoying or worrying? What is a problem that you could need answers or advice for?'"
- The second question would then be about solutions the students have already found for certain difficult situations, e.g.: "Ask yourself: 'What can you do quite well? What could you teach to others? For what problems have you found good solutions? When do other people come to you to ask for advice?'"
- The final question would then get back to the workshop outcome and simply use the answers for the first two questions as inspiration for the third question: "Ask yourself: 'What should your zine be about? For whom would you write this Zine? What title could it have and what would be its content?'"

- **Application to other topics:**

In science or humanities classes, the opening questions could, for example, ask the students about their current knowledge about a certain topic (e.g., global warming), secondly what they find confusing about the topic or what they would like to learn more about, and thirdly, how the topic is connected to or represented in their own lives. Exemplary questions could be:

- “What comes to your mind when you hear the term ‘global warming’ or ‘climate change’? What have you learned about it so far?”
- “What would you be curious about regarding this topic? What questions come to your mind that you would like to ask regarding climate change?”
- “Do you feel the topic has an impact on you beyond learning about it in school? Where do you see how issues around the climate are already embedded in your everyday life? Why could it be interesting or relevant for you to learn more about the topic?”

In order to retrospectively evaluate a class or workshop – be it about philosophy, biology, a sports event, literature club, a visit to the museum or any other form or discipline – the Automatic Writing questions can also help to reflect on the students’ experiences and their take-aways. It can also help them to prepare for possibly upcoming tests, dissertations, projects or next level classes. The questions could either focus more on the taught content or on personal experiences.

- **Transition between questions**

When the alarm of the timer rings after the first few minutes of focused free writing, depending on the size of the group the teacher might amplify the sound with a bell, so everybody hears it. They can also tell the students to finish their last sentence and prepare for the next question, maybe by rotating their wrists in between or shaking their hands since handwriting can be exhausting. The timer can then be set again, and the second question can be posed. All of this is repeated for the third and final round.

## 1.4 Distil

The students then have time (~5-10 minutes) to read what they’ve written down and are welcome to work with their text by underlining or encircling certain words or sentences they find interesting, by adding comments, symbols, pictures or by crossing out certain words or sentences. They can be reminded that there is no right or wrong in this process, but that they should follow their intuition in order to find their unique approach.

This process of reading and editing helps to intuitively decide on one of all the possible approaches. It usually shows what interests the most, what appears to be most urgent, or where the most subjective potential lies. This part of the process is very crucial. It serves as a bridge from “letting it flow” to making a conscious plan.

## Part 2: Harvest

The written texts serve as a pool of ideas and personal reflections that now need to be narrowed down and sorted out to continue a working process.

The texts can then either be a base to decide for the topic and design of their self-care zine, stop-motion-animation or whatever the output medium is. Or it is the source to find a research question that can be

investigated further in a dissertation, essay, documentary, symposium, debate club or any other project the students engage in.

## 2.1 Sorting out and making a plan

To bring some order into the free writing the students take another piece of paper and a pen and divide the paper into five parts by drawing a circle in the middle and then four lines from the circle to every corner of the paper, like this (see Figure 10).

The attached document “Topic Layout Template A” can be used to facilitate this exercise.

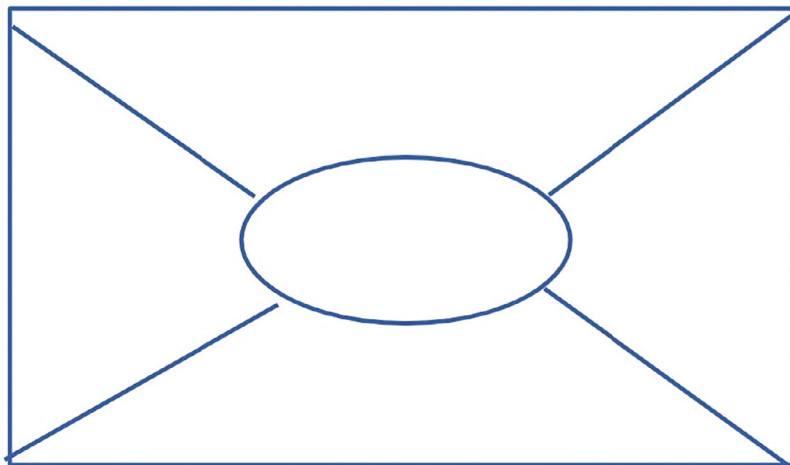


Figure 5.26: Template for Part 2.1. Credit: Beate Absalon.

- In the middle of the circle they can write down one topic – for their self-care zine (e.g., “smartphone addiction”, “favourite friendship activities”), for their essay on global warming (e.g., “posters used at Friday for Future demos”, “recycling”), or for their wishes or expectations regarding a new class (e.g., “more female authors”, “inclusion of introverted students”).
- In the upper field they can write down “Questions” and take a few minutes to write down any question that their zine, essay, etc, could tackle – regarding their topic (e.g. “What else could I do to distract myself from boredom than being on my phone?”; “What does a slogan on a demonstration need in order to get the message about global warming across?”; “Why do we read so many men in philosophy?”)
- In the next field they can write down “Answers” and try to collect answers for some of their questions (e.g., “Instead of scrolling through social media I could write a letter or learn to juggle” etc.).
- While the first two gather ideas around the content – the “What?” –, the next two fields are more about the form a further dealing with those questions could take. In one field the students can write down “How?”. If we take the example of the self-care zines they can then collect ideas about its specific genre (e.g., do they want to write it like a journalistic report, as a letter or a recipe book? Will it contain interviews, comics or lists of recommendations or journaling questions?). The ideas in filling in the “How” section can be greatly enriched by the appropriate input on the different forms and possibilities of the target medium. Similar approaches can be applied for any other artistic outcome as well as research papers (e.g., by asking about its methods, structure, material and resources).

- The last field gives space to collect ideas about the “Style”, “Design” or the “Aesthetics” of the project. Here the students can, for example, write down anything about their Zine’s looks (e.g., if it should be purely in black and white or what other colours and materials they want to use; if they want to make a very small micro-magazine or a huge one; if they want to create a collage, etc.) Same can be applied to any other artistic project and research paper (e.g., by asking about its rhetorical style, length, audience, etc.).

#### *Adaptation:*

This process of decision-making, sorting out and specifying one’s project, topic or involvement can be adapted for different needs and aims. If it is less about crafting and more about problem-solving it could be possible to write the problem into the middle. In one field, the student tries to formulate a precise question for the problem. In another field they could collect ideas about certain needs or reasons behind the problem, and in the next one possible solution. In the final corner they will write down ideas for realistic actions and next steps of how to get closer to the solution.

The attached document “Topic Layout Template B” can be used to facilitate this exercise.

## Part 3: Transformation into a project

The creative writing process, which serves as a preparation for the students to get into a work-in-progress and start with their project, ends here. They can use their Automatic Writing or Sorting Out-Diagram to orient themselves about what to do next. When creating their self-care Zine, for example, they serve as a blueprint or a plan, reminding them of their ideas and approaches in order to not get lost or doing things arbitrarily. Now they have a direction when starting to gather their needed materials, writing their texts within a certain congruent design they decided for. The students learn to prepare for a task while making their own choices which make most sense for them and their idea, which can raise their motivation to work on the project and feeling attuned to it.