Lesson Plan

Any of the questions below could be prompts for free-writing exercises. Peter Elbow defines freewriting as "private, non-stop writing" (85).

- Developing writers are not required to show what they've written to anyone.
- Since it is a free-writing exercise, writer is free to deviate or digress.
- Free-writers should not censor themselves: they can say whatever they like, and grammar, spelling, coherence are non-issues.
- Writers participating in this exercise do not need to be concerned with how good the writing is: it doesn't even need to make sense.

The only rule is that they have to keep writing for the prescribed time: five, ten or fifteen minute periods. A monitor or facilitator chooses the prompt and sets the time.

Elbow distinguishes between *pure* freewriting (described above), *focused* freewriting (where writers try not to digress unless the digression somehow informs the topic) and *public* freewriting (where writers are asked to be prepared to share with others whatever they have written) (86).

Rowena Murray suggests that free-writers write in complete sentences, expressing complete thoughts (88), and lists a number of uses for freewriting (94):

- As a warm-up for writing
- To look for topics
- To sift through topics
- To write in short bursts
- To get into the 'writing habit'
- To develop fluency
- To clarify your thoughts
- To stop yourself editing too soon
- To find or choose between topics
- To do incremental writing, in stages
- To increase confidence in your writing
- To overcome obstacles by articulating them
- To put the 'personal' voice into impersonal research

For our purposes, in this exercise, freewriting is used in order to encourage developing writers to explore their process and the feelings, thoughts, behaviours that accompany the process in its various stages and iterations and that sometimes prevent them from reaching their writing goals. Also, freewriting is used here to acknowledge the value of drafting—just putting ideas down on paper without wasting time or energy with audience-based concerns.

Below are questions that serve as prompts. The questions are specific to the interview with Joseph O'Connor. It is recommended that the facilitator either play the entire video for their class or else show the parts that are relevant to the questions assigned as prompts. Give one prompt at a time. It is

recommended that the writing session be followed by an opportunity to share thoughts or responses, either as a class, in small groups or in pairs.

Facilitators are free of course to come up with their own questions. What follows are samples.

1. When asked what brings him to the beginning of a story, what prompts him to write, he answers that, for him, it starts with the identification of a gap, a book that hasn't been written, a question about why it hasn't been written. He says that every writer writes the book or story they themselves would like to read. When you are writing, whether academically or creatively, are you writing the paper or story that you yourself would like to read?
2. Joseph thinks writers should analyse what they do when they write, monitoring their process, the way they go about crafting their fiction. Do you monitor what you do when writing? Can you describe what you do when you write? Your process?
3. Joseph tells a story about copying out in long-hand John McGahern's *Sierra Leone*, copying it out and revising it through multiple drafts. This practice has a parallel in ancient Greek and Roman Rhetorical Pedagogy, useful for learning to manipulate figures of speech, thought, amplification, etc. and for coming up with something to say, a way of getting started. Do you see value in imitation, the appropriation of the voices of others? What are some of the values of imitating the style of those who you like to read?
4. Like many of the writers interviewed for this series, Joseph places great value on reading. Great writers, says Joseph, teach him how to read. Have you read a writer that had this effect on you, making you stop to realise there is more to the message than just the denotation, the surface meaning? Who was the author, and what did you learn from him or her?
5. Joseph calls *Star of the Sea* the book that taught him how to write a novel. Have you had similar experiences with things that you have written? An academic or creative piece that changed the way you approached the genre? A successful composition that was bigger and better than you thought yourself capable of?
6. Writing, says Joseph, should always be about the reader, about the dynamic between the reader and the writer. In the case of his novels, it should be about putting "just a tiny drop of beauty back into [a world with more than its share of ugliness]". What do your papers or stories do for your readers? What do your readers get from your writing?
7. Joseph writes every day. He says that if he were to write only when the muse struck, he would rarely write. Do you have a writing routine? Do you only write when there is an assigned occasion? Or are you always writing? How do you keep yourself motivated?
8. Joseph places a great deal of value on the "architecture and engineering of a novel", saying that the lack of it where most novels fall down. How important is structure for you?
9. Joseph uses many graphical aides, including graphs, lines, images and drawings, to help him visualise his structure, unable to write until he knows how everything connects. Is your sense of order spatial? Or is it more topical or logical? How do you perceive and maintain a sense of order in your papers? And can you find it while writing, or do you need to establish order first?
10. Joseph spent two years planning *Star of the Sea* and only 9 months writing it, more than twice as long planning as writing. What is your ratio of planning time to writing time?
11. Joseph uses the Field paradigm, a three act paradigm as a way of organising components that, to be successful, are necessary, that are the metal in a sound structural frame. The three parts are the inciting incident, the plot points and the point of no return. To some who write academically, this

paradigm might resonate with some of our sense of our own genres, for instance, the IMRaD format: Introduction – Method – Results – and – Discussion. Does your genre have a particular argumentative framework? What are the necessary components?

12. Joseph acknowledges that it is very difficult to say what you mean, saying that getting a sentence to say even 80% of what you meant constitutes a brilliant milestone. Is this your experience? Do you have difficulty putting words together in a way that states exactly what you mean? What are some of your frustrations with language?
13. Joseph's value for what he describes as "a grain of stupidity", "the quality of not quite getting the point of things at once", having to reread and rethink what you have read, getting the full measure slowly. This resonates with Martin Schwartz's article in the *Journal of Cell Science*, "The importance of stupidity in scientific research". Do you have this grain of stupidity? Do you find you have been too hasty in assuming the meaning of some assertion, only later to realise there was more to it than you originally realised? Is this kind of stupidity something that you think you might benefit from developing? How might you go about doing that?
14. Joseph recognises the debt Star of the Sea, Redemption Falls and Ghost Light owes to some of his earlier gigantic failures. He has learned from his failure and benefitted. How have you benefitted from your failures? What lessons were learned?
15. The value of creative writing to academic writers, Joseph tells us, is in the empowerment of the writer. Writing, he says, "is the medium through which you change people's lives". Have your academic papers benefitted from creative works? What of the language, the structure or the way creative writers make their case can we bring to our academic compositions?

Works Cited

Elbow, Peter. *Everyone Can Write: Essays Toward a Hopeful Theory of Writing and Teaching Writing*. New York: Oxford UP, 2000. Print.

Murray, Rowena. *How to Write a Thesis*, 2nd ed. Maidenhead, Birkshire: Open UP, 2006. Print.