



The Terrain of Prewriting

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Wisps of language, tendrils of voice, a thread to an idea. I count prewriting, or the moments that precede writing, as among the most astonishing aspects of writing, for the Nothing of the preverbal abuts the Something of writing. One moment, no idea for writing; the next, a workable idea, image, or phrase, and the person is typing. Clearly, something occurs during prewriting which filters into the next part of the process; prewriting is needed for a draft to happen. It's not just a matter of not yet having found the *right start* or *right set of words*: even more so, prewriting is about engaging the preverbal, appreciating (and even summoning) the *right silence* that surrounds potential language. The cognitive terrain of prewriting recalls the surrealist paintings of Yves Tanguy: a polymorphic landscape with the beginnings of recognizable forms, mostly blank land in which details are made by chance not ego, by interactions with forces, weather-shaped, wind-blown, lone branches, Easter Isle-like profiles, rock outcroppings, tumbleweed, coils, signs at a slant, italicized. Nothing and everything is present, sine qua non for the creative—no preconceptions and no limitations. The person who wants to write perches patiently before this terrain until they overhear a wisp of language or see the thread to an idea.

Invention is an essential part of teaching creative writing as a process, and of the components of invention, prewriting is arguably the most important and the least often taught. The teaching of creative writing as a process is synonymous with teaching creative writing at all—process *is* pedagogy. However, to teach creative writing as a process means providing guidance on how to write at every step, not cherry picking different parts of the writing experience. Especially with the workshop model, a disproportional amount of instructional time is typically devoted to the middle to tail end of the process, to feedback and occasionally to revision, than to the starting moments of writing. What ensues is the sense of a no-fly zone over invention—the notion that certain areas of writers' experiences are off-limits, that the crucial step of prewriting is fundamentally unteachable, ultimately a regressive view inside our discipline of Creative Writing Studies. In the classical Greco-Roman approach, creating was separated into five phases—invention, arrangement, style,

memorization, and delivery—with invention concerned with discovery moments that can include the earliest moments before words begin to appear on the page.

In this article, I make a case for invention techniques focused on prewriting to be understood as those moments in which a writer looks toward the preverbal in order to activate his or her intrapersonal voice. The prewriting phase of a writing process is usually explained as “everything that takes place before the first draft” or activities which occur prior to “the point where the ‘writing idea’ is ready for the words and page” (Murray, “Teach Writing” 2-3; Rohman 106). My sense of prewriting excludes the legwork done in preparation such as conducting research, note-taking, collecting and gathering, or discussing a nascent idea with writing colleagues. Prewriting here means preverbal: no language has been already produced toward the writer’s particular aim, not even notes. That is, preverbal refers to the contemplation of the emptiness before language rushes in; a preverbal state of writing is expansive ideally with no decisions yet made about style, content, or possibly genre. As Don Murray maintained in his 1978 article “Write Before Writing,” teachers “should give careful attention to what happens between the moment the writer receives an idea or an assignment and the moment the first completed draft is begun” (28). To successfully engage the preverbal, creative writing students work at a distance from audience expectations through activities which are low-stakes, informal, and occasionally private. Most importantly, students need to be provided with ways to prewrite in addition to the more content-directive prompts and exercises which frequently serve as invention praxis in creative writing courses in order to develop their self-reliance as writers and ability to write for the long-term.

I suggest four such low-stakes invention activities for creative writers to encounter the preverbal: freewriting (including disposable and private writing); Peter Elbow’s Open-Ended Method; Sondra Perl’s Felt Sense Method; and my own Yoga for Hands. These heuristics are genre non-specific and thus less susceptible to predetermined thinking and audience regulation, leading to an expansive experience of invention. The four heuristics ask students to be verbal on the page but only after purposefully facing blankness: the preverbal becomes part of the experience of the prompt. Essentially, the heuristics ask students to take stock of that blankness and to find their cues from material found in emptiness. Writers benefit from prompts that direct the preverbal with the caveat that the prompts avoid prescribing content; otherwise, the preverbal is relegated to the “unteachable,” and I contend that *nothing* is actually unteachable about the writing process. The prompts discussed in this article serve to help writers become conscious of the preverbal (by becoming aware of the preverbal, one simultaneously becomes more aware of the opposite, or of limiting thoughts about the upcoming writing experience). Secondly, prompts initiating contact with the preverbal tend to elicit the verbal: that’s just the nature of the human mind. It’s endlessly discursive. What differentiates the heuristics covered here from other takes on prewriting is how they each help a writer

make the leap from no writing to what-could-be-written-about without pre-selecting the topic in any sense prior to the prompt—a markedly different take on discovery. The fourth heuristic, Yoga for Hands, is slightly different in that its purpose is to lead to an attunement with the preverbal and establish a mindset to make those leaps. It's unlikely that the text generated by Yoga for Hands—basically, an extended reflection of the writer's body—will be retained by the writer or adapted for a piece of creative writing

On the whole, the benefits of this prewriting-based invention in the creative writing classroom are multifold. Such invention strategies help students generate ideas for new pieces; foster awareness of the creative process, one that is comprehensive rather than foreshortened; and help reduce writing anxiety in the short- and long-term. In fact, prewriting can be a bellwether for the quality of a person's overall writing process—and writing education.

TEACHING INVENTION TO CREATIVE WRITERS

Let's imagine the experience of two hypothetical graduate students in poetry (although what is said could easily apply to undergraduates or another genre of study).

Student #1 is entering her second year in a two-year graduate program, and in her coursework she almost always follows a pattern: try to write a poem, submit it for workshop, listen to the critique, and return home with the poem. Despite the intelligent peer and instructor feedback which has provided her with several provocative structural or content suggestions, she feels oddly empty-handed. It's true that her education in workshop settings isn't entirely focused on written products since an important part of the writing process—giving and receiving of feedback—is highlighted. The first half of the writing process, however, is obscure, and she is largely left to her own devices when it comes to invention. She finds herself turning elsewhere for guidance on creative work, to biographies of painters, or if lucky, conversations with fellow students outside of class. Ironically, the best she feels as a poet is when teaching her section of first-year composition for her graduate fellowship and attending T.A. training sessions facilitated by a faculty member from the First-Year Writing Program. She's not sure why some of her friends disdain teaching the course; for her, it's a relief from the hollowness of the MFA program because at least in the composition course she is able to talk about writing processes, invention, and deep revision.

Student #2 studies under poetry teachers who regularly ask him to practice freewriting, private writing, and disposable writing in order to access his intrapersonal voice. He is encouraged to see poem drafts as low-stakes activities isolated from any imperative for polish, peers, prestige, and publication. He quickly turns to a ten-minute freewrite in order to complete an exercise his instructor gave him on reworking cliché. He is told that writing is a holistic activity involving and

accepting all of him, not just the achieving part of him that was accepted into the MFA program. He is reminded that difficulties in writing are natural to a developing writer and even to skilled author. He is shown how to take a long-term view of both his poems and his professional development, assured that this development may not neatly fit into a fifteen week course or a two-year program. Upon graduation, he is light years ahead, saved from lost time and frustration. In fact, he's practically bilingual and versed in both the language of process and that of production. The happy paradox seems that the more he practices low-stakes, informal writing, the easier he seems to reach a few polished, high-stakes pieces. William Stafford's maxim—to be prolific, lower your standards—is taped to his laptop and makes complete sense by the time he graduates.

Especially in highly competitive environments of writing education, the lack of instruction in invention and specifically of prewriting compounds the stress and unpleasantness of writing to the detriment of the student. Graduate students who make the commitment of attending a program in creative writing are usually searching for ways to engage with the process and are not enrolled just for the purposes of product, recognition, funding, or publication. While graduate students may not always possess the vocabulary of the writing process, they invariably want to avoid that disengagement with the process recognizable as a writing block. In fact, it's part of faculty responsibility to draw MFA students' attention to the writing process, helping students put terminology to previously unformulated moments of that process, including prewriting, to make the graduate school experience meaningful. As Dennis Cass says in a *Poets & Writers* article, "How to Get Unstuck," individuals who write with ease are perceptive about process: they notice their affective and cognitive situation during particular moments of writing and stay informed of their options for engaging in that writing process. When I reflect on my own seemingly intractable struggles as a twentysomething at the Iowa Writers' Workshop, it wasn't the workshop model of feedback that caused me grief per se—and maybe not any so-called star pedagogy—but rather the lack of instruction in the writing process and of invention and prewriting.

I often felt I was hostage to a massive aesthetic problem. In school for creative writing, I received little guidance on the invention stages of the writing process. Every now and then, I'd catch a glimpse of another writer's invention process—overhearing how one Pulitzer Prize-winning teacher practiced letting his work go fallow between books or how another teacher used a breathing technique to start poems. Subsequently, while giving and receiving feedback with the expectation of revision was part of the workshop classroom, the first half of the writing process, invention and all its complexities, was left in the dark. No one talked about ways to generate and continue writing or how to manage audience proximity. No one explained that what might look like a writing block could actually be a necessary delay or the natural functioning of the unconscious. Perhaps the burden of their own writing difficulties made it impalpable for the teachers to take on these worries of their

students, but it's more likely that invention praxis was never modeled to them by their own teachers, caught up in the feedback-heavy workshop model.

The writing process is a sequence through which a text generally moves from formlessness to ever-increasing form, from multiple possibilities to a stabilized structure likely intended for an audience. Although it is possible for a piece of writing to remain even happily in one of the earlier phases—journal-writing or a disposable freewrite, for instance, or James Britton's expressive writing—most creative writers specializing in a genre seek to advance at least a portion of their work to the later phases. If this urge for advanced stage, polished writing overwhelms earlier more exploratory moments in the process, what results is false emphasis on outcome that can lead to problems in composing. Graeme Harper has asked that creative writers be more attentive to “how many acts or actions of creative writers are fixed and how many are in motion, part of a continuum of action, inseparable from the action beside them, before them, or after them” (5). The workshop model, on the other hand, abbreviates that continuum to the middle and end of the process, narrowing the window of opportunity to feedback and revision. Along a similar line, Tim Mayers has said, “Creative writing as an activity is undoubtedly enmeshed with process. But workshop pedagogy often focused only on a single, frozen moment in that process; all of the real work (the “process,” if you will) took place before and after that moment (*Creative Writing Pedagogies* 41). That tendency is displayed in the recent collection *Dispatches from the Classroom: Graduate Students on Creative Writing Pedagogy*. Although the collection does commendable work in showcasing graduate student instructors, its authors posit revision as the center of the curriculum, describing workshop models that employ “revision as their unstated foundation” because revision is “the implicit core of the course” (10). The overemphasis on the tail end of process is contained in the book's organization, with its opening section, “Laying the Ground Rules: Workshop, Revision, and Grading in the Creative Writing Syllabus,” and first chapter, “Preventing Tears in Workshop: Teaching Students How to Give and Receive Criticism.” What's bypassed is the entire first half of the writing process, reflecting the tendency of workshop pedagogy to abbreviate the chronology of the writing process to one moment.

Allowing mid- to tail end writing activities such as feedback, revision, or proofreading to overshadow invention phases closer to the beginning sends a deleterious pair of messages to novices. One message says that what really counts in the course are polished and publishable end products—not the open-ended efforts of learning whose resolutions might not happen by the fifteenth week of a semester or the fourth semester of an MFA program. The second message is that it's the students who are capable of making those submittable, polished texts who are the accomplished members of the group. In this way, the mishandling of invention is connected to the “teachability” argument in creative writing, the perennial questions of “can it be taught” and “should it be taught” which are

bound up in elitist views of creative potential (Dawson 1; Ritter and Vanderslice xi-xii). Faculty who consider invention too intimate, internal, or private an activity to be brought into the light of a curriculum fall under the “can” camp. How can the whims of inspiration be managed? For the “should” camp, invention without instruction is central to their view that creative expression is the purview of a select group, those whose innate genius needs no guidance. In this view, writing students who seek assistance with finding ideas—those who should be sent to the “ghetto of the failed and uninspired” according to Anis Shivani—should not bother pursuing a writing degree (*Against* 19-20). MFA programs that omit instruction in invention bring to mind Marine training: students who can’t find their own ideas will not thrive in the program. It’s like a student taking a blue-book exam—*Don’t get any extra help*—similar to the misperception writing center theorists faced early on from faculty that tutoring constitutes cheating. Of course, this is a Catch-22. If creative writing instructors withhold guidance on process, certain students are more likely to flounder, drop off, fall behind, drop out, and even stop writing, suggesting that a portion of the classroom population has been vetted out *because* they lacked natural ability, a winnowing of the creative flock.

The usual way to address the paucity of instruction in invention is to provide prompts and exercises, preventing students from leaving the classroom empty-handed. The use of exercises to teach invention has a longstanding tradition extending back to the *progymnasmata* of ancient Roman rhetorical education or twelve-exercise sequence which included the retelling Aesopian fables, encomium, impersonation, and evocative description. More contemporary writing exercises involve solving a structural puzzle poised by the teacher—write a narrative with four given plot elements, use only monosyllabic words, rework a cliché, adopt the point-of-view of an object, and so forth. Students are “presented with something like a puzzle, and their immediate task is to figure out some way in which they might begin to solve it; for many of them, that first step involves diving headlong into the story itself” (Mayers 38). With puzzle-based invention, the teacher engineers the composing present by providing content, structural, or genre stipulations, all of which reduce the openness of the inventive moment. Instead of looking toward the preverbal, the student responds to the teacher as an audience. This type of invention unfortunately makes composing audience-focused from the starting bell, a rhetorical situation similar to Greco-Roman strategies for invention which included “‘status’ or ‘issue’ questions” and “‘topics’ or ‘commonplaces,’ such as Division, Consequence, Cause, Effect or Definition” (Murphy 42). Ancient invention provided learners only minimal distance from audience expectations because persuasion—necessarily an involvement with others—was the primary objective from the start of any project. Students of invention were intent upon identifying logical appeals which would persuade an audience (Bizzell and Herzberg 1632). Don Murray thought teachers relied on exercises because they “often do not have enough faith in their students to feel that the students have anything to say,” and he believed that most “poor writing [teachers] see in school is the product of the assignments they give” (“Writing as Process”

18-19). Although I don't subscribe to Murray's negative take on teacher-provided starts, I do think it's preferable for a writer to come to invention at least occasionally with very few provisions, what E.C. White calls "the desire to give voice to the previously 'unheard of'—precisely, by the 'will-to-invent'" (7). Exercise-based invention can unquestionably be helpful. However, it doesn't necessarily develop certain abilities critical to students who would pursue creative writing after our classes; exercises do not always help those individuals who are in writing for the long-term, not just for a grade or degree.

It is critical that instruction foster students' independent work with invention to prevent dependency on provided exercises and prompts. Many graduates of MFA Programs struggle after obtaining the degree to establish a regular writing practice to "circumvent those feelings of loss when your MFA program ends—those feelings of self-doubt when the work gets hard" (Haines 1). Creative writers need to take measures to prevent an overreliance on school settings, teachers, and their assignments. As Robert Boice avers, "Until writers learn to trust themselves as a faithful source of inventiveness, they continue to hesitate and doubt" (44). I concur with Tom C. Hunley when he says "Good invention exercises help writers tap their own intuitive faculties, rather than giving them formulaic, mechanical methods of writing" (*Five Canons* 40). We should take a page from the related discipline of Composition Studies and increase the depth and range of invention research inside Creative Writing Studies, with Janet Lauer's laundry list serving as a good start:

The relationship between invention and the writing process, the heuristic function of invention as a kind of thinking that stimulates new knowledge, invention as an art or strategic practice, the importance of classroom attention to invention, interdisciplinary theoretical linkages with inventional epistemologies, and the consequential nature of invention studies for practice and pedagogy. (2)

In teaching invention, creative writing pedagogy also models processes for students to use after they've completed their course work. Learning to write is lifelong learning: cumulatively, this learning will occur much more in the months and years outside the walls of an academic institution than in the fifteen weeks of a semester or few years of a program. Scholars have appreciated the power of the extracurriculum or the ways in which individuals have historically obtained informal writing instruction (writing groups, online forums, self-help books) when formal classroom education is not available for socio-economic or geographic reasons (Gere; Peary). What is now needed is an understanding of the post-curriculum or the writing habits and ongoing self-motivated professional development of individuals who previously received formal classroom training.

PREWRITING: ATTRIBUTES AND CONDITIONS FOR CREATIVE WRITING

Comprehensive instruction in invention requires staying attentive to prewriting—to the activities which may bear little resemblance to an eventual final text and may not actually involve writing of any kind. In the remarkable essay, “The Necessary Delay,” process proponent Donald Murray showed how non-writing, what he calls the five necessary delays of waiting for voice, insight, information, order, and motive, can play a crucial role in starting a piece. These forms of non-writing should not be misconstrued as writing blocks, procrastination, or laziness. In fact, instruction in prewriting is important to prevent the mislabeling of the preverbal moment as a writing block. Making this mistake, a writer might see the preverbal as a malformation in their writing ability, possibly as reason to give up altogether, instead of as a door to the creative moment. The preverbal can be daunting if faced without guidance and can easily distort into a source of writing anxiety. Stuck writers tend to misperceive their own actions inside a writing process, rigidly thinking they’re engaged in one phase when they’re actually doing another (Hjortshoj; Rose). Prewriting can involve a whole host of activities, ranging from reflecting, using alternative activities to trigger the unconscious, reading, meditating, freewriting, drawing, and waiting. Later in his career, Murray called this phase “prevision” which he explains as:

Encompass[ing] everything that precedes the first draft—receptive experience, such as awareness (conscious and unconscious), observation, remembering; and exploratory experience, such as research, reading, interviewing, and note-taking [to] identify a subject, limit it, develop a point of view towards it, and begin to find the voice to explore the subject. (“Internal” 125)

What should be taught in prewriting is how to embrace possibility, including that of non-writing or the feared blank page. Explicit instruction in prewriting—in which the concept of prewriting is openly discussed with students and models and strategies are presented—is potentially far more effective than hoping for tacit knowledge, hoping students pick up these concepts by implication. Many people learning to write are more “Beethovenian” (those who plod along in creating) than “Mozartian” (those who can “instantaneously arrange encounters with [the] unconscious” (Emig, “Uses” 11; Holmes). Prewriting also determines a writer’s pace and affective experience: students should be shown that an “ideal gait for prewriting... will afford comfortable, reflective, and productive outputs. It will be moderate and steady, but occasionally variable” (Boice 53). In other words, what is taught in prewriting is an attitude in which the writer tries to unhinge preconceived notions, focus on outcome, and develop practices to sustain writing for the long haul.

A writer engaged in the preverbal strives to be as free of preconceived notions about the upcoming activity as possible. *Preverbal* refers to the contemplation of the emptiness before language rushes in; a preverbal state is expansive with few to no decisions made about style, content, or possibly

genre. It's Emily Dickinson's dwelling in Possibility. Instead of arriving with pre-formulated decisions about the text, the writer arrives open-handed and attuned to the state of discovery. It means no words yet but rather the emergence of words at any second. Writing theorists including Peter Elbow, Janet Emig, and Donald Murray recognized early on that there could be powerful private moments in the process during which a writer was discovering new material—not rearranging already reached deckchairs of ideas. Writing is a movement from a powerful unknowing, one not frightening but instead energized by curiosity, to a form of knowing in which the writer makes personal connections (Rohman 109). Scholars have used different terms for how to interact with this preverbal state, this energetic blankness, including James Moffett's "suspending inner speech" (239) and Peter Elbow's "strategies for managing chaos"—for indeed to some writers, this vast openness *does* have the unsettling feeling of chaos, all the more reason students should receive instruction in the preverbal (*Writing With* 49). The preverbal is formless because the writer is trying to disengage from preconceptions—to be, as D.W. Harding put it, "a little more faithful to the non-verbal background of language than an over-ready acceptance of ready-made terms and phrases will permit" (172). The writer who is involved in the preverbal responds spontaneously rather than responding as someone with preconceptions of genre, self-expectation, or audience to live up to. In this way, language is shaped "at the point of utterance," to borrow James Britton's phrase, who thought there were powerful lessons for writers learn from the spontaneity of talk and from how ideas are invented and shaped during the same improvisational moment.

To what is the creative writer oriented then in this preverbal moment, this creative-cognitive space razed of obligation and detail? This "what" is captured in Wallace Stevens' lines from "Pieces": "Tinsel in February, tinsel in August. There are things in a man besides his reason" (351). The creative writer is embarking on an exploration of the unconscious. Accessing the unconscious is an attempt to step beyond one's own knowing, not just beyond information or language provided by society, but to something having to do with non-verbal awareness. As Jacques Maritain said of poetry, "poetry has its source in the preconceptual life of the intellect." Maritain describes the preconceptual as "not merely logical reason; it involves an exceedingly more profound—and more obscure—life" (3-4). The unconscious with all its preverbal knowing is central to the invention phase of creative writing, not just technical prowess. In his concept of *duende*, Lorca describes a gritty force, separate from skill or training, which is a "power, not a work; it is a struggle, not a thought" (202). Moreover, student writing that is overly conscious—that trades in provided material or well-trodden emotions and ideas—can result in work that's "written from one layer of the self—the ectoderm" (Emig, "Uses," 5). Typically, little to no room is made for intuition or the unconscious in school curricula, or, if it occurs in a student's experience, the student himself has found a way usually hard-won and self-taught. Peter Elbow points out that freewriting—a prewriting technique I'll shortly discuss—is one way the unconscious can kick up a bit of challenge for this type of

student and thus help her evolve (*Writing With* 18-19). This inclusion of the unconscious in creative writing instruction, however, should steer clear of Romantic conceptions of individual genius to avoid walking into old arguments about elitism or whether creative writing is teachable. Instead, students can be shown to look for ways the unconscious is actually a combination of what Jung called the “personal unconscious” (imagery, metaphor, wisps of dialog or voice, columns of narrative generated by the student’s life experience) and a more socially constructed intertextual unconscious (material generated from exposure to models, reading, and conversations about writing).

In addition to exploring the unconscious, the creative writer is also increasing his or her awareness of the composing present while in the preverbal moment. That is, the writer needs to become aware of the safety of the creative moment (the absence of audiences, teachers, and critics) to feel comfortable enough to investigate the unconscious. Audience is to no small extent a matter of controlled proximity. In the earliest moments, a writer is likely separated by space and time from eventual readers (barring the unusual circumstance of writing within eyeshot of one’s future reader—for instance, a test-taking circumstance). Any audience interaction is fictive, with the safe or dangerous audience a matter of the imagination—an invoked or evoked audience (Ong 10-12; Elbow *Writing With* 181-189; Ede and Lunsford 156). Later in the process, with the exchange of drafts or submission of a final version for evaluation or publication, the audience (still imaginary) is significantly closer in the writer’s thinking, affecting structure and content. As Peter Elbow proposed in *Writing with Power*, individuals gain facility with writing by recognizing the impact of different audience types on their composing experience and taking steps if the audience dynamic is prohibitive (191). The preverbal is the moment in which a writer is most sequestered from the influence of future audiences because the text is at its most formless or at its most dynamic rather than stabilized state. This Neptune-like distance from audience is crucial for understanding as well as for teaching prewriting as an invention strategy for creative writing.

Prewriting heuristics give students opportunity with low-stakes (not every piece undergoes revision or is supposed to lead to a polished product) and even private writing (not every piece of writing done in a creative writing course is shown to a reader or teacher). Paramount to these prewriting tactics is the establishment of the writer’s control over his or her proximity to internalized audience; this in turn requires that the activities be low-stakes—barely if at all evaluated or graded—and frequent. Most educational experience of writing entails high-stakes writing, or projects that are connected to a portion of a final grade and usually involve revision and polishing; in contrast, low-stakes tasks foster the safety and trust for exploration. Peter Elbow defines low-stakes as “frequent, informal assignments that make students spend time regularly reflecting in written language on what they are learning from discussions, readings, lectures, and their own thinking” (*Everyone* 353). As Elbow has explained, “we should *honor* nonverbal knowing, inviting students

to use low-stakes writing to fumble and fish for words for what they sense and intuit but cannot yet clearly say” (*Everyone* 352). Privacy is different than isolation: while it’s frequently beneficial to write without obligation to any reader, that’s not the case with the discouraging isolation creative writing students may face when their education doesn’t cover parts of the writing experience. When designing low-stakes assignments that foster prewriting, it’s therefore important for instructors to provide guidance in how to engage with prewriting and to build in opportunities for students to reflect on their prewriting experiences—for instance, class discussions and process notes. Low-stakes work in creative writing courses could include exercises, freewrites, drafts, collaborative writing, journaling, and process writing for any stage, including revision as well as prewriting. For instance, creative writing instructors put a twist on the traditional product focus and simultaneously demonstrate the importance of prewriting by assigning a high-stakes, graded process essay in conjunction with a finished poem or story. A variation on this method would be to assign this type of metacognitive process writing in conjunction with one of the prewriting heuristics mentioned later in this chapter—Felt Sense, Open-Ended, or Yoga For Hands.

Notably, it’s in the terrain of the preverbal that a writer hears his or her intrapersonal voice, that dialectic of call and response, the internal inquiry characteristic of imaginative rhetoric and which lets a piece of writing begin. *Intrapersonal* refers to internal self-to-self dialog as opposed to the communication with others that is *interpersonal*. When a person contemplates the preverbal, it’s intrapersonal voice that steps onto the scene, bearing wording, phrasing, imagery—the beginning of content. The writer watches intrapersonal dialog, that stream of phrases, images, emotions, prompts, fragments, overheard language, self-generated judgments about writing ability, Vygotskian inner speech, sensations, after-images, anticipations of audience, and crystallizations of past writing performances. From its cognitive flotsam and jetsam, the writer pulls forth ideas and approaches for creative writing. Intrapersonal dialog can function as a “kind of pre-audience self-talk” (private time in which the self is center stage) or as a “way for the writer to talk to himself or herself about strategies for reaching an audience” (huddle time with self to plan out future interactions with audience) (Hunley 41). Due to the absence of a flesh-and-blood reader during composing, all creative writing begins as intrapersonal dialog before it moves to the interpersonal such that “all writing as authoring must be some revision of inner speech” (Moffett 233). Showing students how to access the intrapersonal through the preverbal is also an important prevention against writing blocks: intact inner talk leads to finished creative pieces. As Carl Rogers explained, problems in interpersonal communication occur because of prior cracks in an individual’s self-communication (83-85). In addition to accessing intrapersonal dialog to find new content, creative writers can turn to the intrapersonal to measure the proximity to future audiences and to notice how they are framing the writing task and their ability to complete it. A writer’s internal rhetoric is, as Jean Nienkamp has outlined, a powerful persuasive force on the self. This sphere of influence also

includes how the writer is feeling about his or her own ability. Lastly, due to the ongoing nature of inner talk—babble, monkey mind, discursivity—everyone can discover material in the preverbal. In *Writing the Australian Crawl: Views on the Writer's Vocation*, William Stafford recounts waiting in the early morning hours with a “receptive, careless of failure” mindset, accepting of whatever arises and trusting that an idea or bit of language would in fact arise: “Something always occurs, of course, to any of us. We can’t keep from thinking” (18). The preverbal is fundamentally democratic—part of an open-access education in creative expression—because it provides access to that profuse intrapersonal voice.

PREWRITING HEURISTIC #1: FREEWITING

Freewriting is the baseline activity for many invention heuristics, including those discussed in the remainder of this article. Although freewriting produces words, it’s the disposition a person who freewrites brings to the writing moment that allows for an encounter with the intrapersonal and preverbal. Understood as a “nonediting” and non-stop writing activity (Elbow *Writing Without* 3-6), freewriting allows writing to resemble talking, benefiting from the spontaneity, the overflowing inventiveness, and the impermanence (and thus lowered quality standards) of speaking. That is, freewriting resembles talking in that both often seem to be a lower-stakes activity in which individuals tend to edit their words less and tend to entertain ideas more often (albeit incomplete ones) because of fewer requirements to elaborate, define, describe, and so forth. In fact, freewriting most resembles intrapersonal talk, and writers benefit when they’ve paid attention to that intrapersonal talk as well as legitimizing it by transcribing it onto the page or screen. The free associative nature of freewriting and its roots in Surrealism, as mapped by Ken Macrorie, are suggestive of the ways in which this invention strategy can help a writer interact with the unconscious. In her 1934 classic *Becoming a Writer*, Dorothea Brande connected this spontaneous writing to “harnessing the unconscious” which means working in the early morning when “the unconscious is in the ascendant”:

The best way to do this is to rise half an hour, or a full hour, earlier than you customarily rise. Just as soon as you can—and without talking, without reading the morning’s paper, without picking up the book you laid aside the night before—begin to write. Write anything that comes into your head...The excellence or ultimate worth of what you write is of no importance yet... To reiterate, what you are actually doing is training yourself, in the twilight zone between sleep and the full waking state, simply to write... Forget that you have any critical faculty at all; realize that no one need ever see what you are writing unless you choose to show it. (72-73)

The seemingly loose, disorganized, shapeless nature of this practice allows for a temporary loosening of one’s tight grip on genre or final product.

Freewriting comes in many variants, among them “shared,” “private,” “focused” or “unfocused,” each indicating a subtly different closeness (or absence) of readers. In addition to adjustments of audience proximity, freewriting provides a creative writer with the opportunity to see his or her own intrapersonal voice on the page or screen—a fairly rare thing given how much writing in educational settings is geared for evaluation, critique, or a grade. Freewriting is important also because of its weighing of quantity over quality: quantity mirrors the natural discursive abundance of our intrapersonal talk whereas quality concerns are premature judgments (sortings, deletions, changes, ordering) indicating the closeness of a reader in the writer’s thinking. Because freewriting isn’t usually genre-specific (i.e.: one doesn’t typically freewrite a villanelle), in its formlessness it’s part of the invention phase and not part of the proofreading or editing phase: freewriting doesn’t usually stand near the final draft of anything. As Peter Elbow describes it in *Writing with Power*, “Freewriting is an exercise for making the quickest and deepest improvements in how you write. The goal is in the process, not the product” (48). Freewriting is also intent upon invention in the sense of coming up with multiple ideas, none of which are necessarily followed through upon. Because freewriting takes a thread of intrapersonal talk and “runs with it,” at least for the length of that discursive moment and until the next wave of thought arrives, it’s a distinct engagement with the preverbal: the writer looks into the preverbal, finds a thread of voice or a picture of an idea, and starts freewriting, making a higher word count than is typical when the writer is composing in specific form. Freewriting infuses movement into the writing process—particularly helpful if someone is stuck. Keith Hjortshoj describes freewriting as joining thinking and writing, putting “these wires together, and the single rule *that you cannot stop* holds them together. Thinking and writing become a single, uninterrupted activity, both mental and physical” (29). However, freewriting is not merely a transcription of discovered intrapersonal talk; rather, freewriting slows down intrapersonal and steers it, turning the writer into a spectator of his or her own inventive moment.

Creative writing students can be encouraged to use freewriting in a gamut of ways to gain insight about their writing experience, to take the temperature of their internal audience relations, to find content, to find individual lines or phrases, to resolve a structural issue, to keep track of structural or formal moves they might want to keep for future work, to sort through feedback suggestions, and so forth. In addition to using freewriting for the other prewriting heuristics outlined in the following pages, freewriting can be employed prior to beginning a new creative piece simply to establish the right stance toward discovery—a promotion of acceptance, receptivity, and non-evaluation.

PREWRITING HEURISTIC #2: OPEN-ENDED METHOD

In his 1981 *Writing With Power*, a seminal text of the process movement, Peter Elbow provides a range of heuristics meant to assist creativity, differing in the amount of exposure essentially they

give of the “chaos” or openness of the preverbal moment. Elbow explains that that openness to pre-writing can be frightening and can also require more effort and time, and so he offers a range of heuristics to accommodate different writing situations—with the caveat that most writers could benefit from more exposure to that openness with its power to cut through preconception of task and ability (48-49). He describes the “Open-Ended Writing Process” as:

A way to bring to birth an unknown, unthought-of piece of writing—a piece of writing that is not yet in you...This process invites maximum chaos and disorientation. You have to be willing to nurse something through many stages over a long period of time and to put up with not knowing where you are going. Thus it is a process that can change you, not just your words. (50)

Due to its proximity to that radical openness, Elbow thinks this method is suited for the genres of creative writing as well as being useful in composition courses. In practice, the Open-Ended Method entails alternating between bursts of nonstop freewriting and pauses in which a focus is identified from the freewritten passage, or a cycling between two types of consciousness—“immersion” and “perspective” (52). First, the writer freewrites for 20-30 minutes and then rereads the passage to identify its center or focus, writing it down in ideally a sentence-length assertion. Elbow says the “focus” could take different forms:

You can find the main idea that is there; or the new idea that is trying to be there; or the imaginative focus or center of gravity—an image or object or feeling; or perhaps some brand new thing occurs to you now as very important—it may even seem unrelated to what you wrote, but it comes to you now as a result of having done that burst of writing. (51)

The writer repeats the whole pattern as many times as needed until the writer has a sense of the structure or direction or a new piece, enough to drop the method.

The Open-Ended heuristic distinctly positions the writer toward the preverbal and the unconscious during invention. For one, it bears a particular relation to knowing and premeditation since it is “ideal for the situation where you sense you have something to write but you don’t quite know what” (51). Not simply genre non-specific, with this heuristic, the very impulse to write may in itself be preverbal or wordless, a sensation (reminiscent of Felt Sense). This type of prewriting means preceding with a nonverbalized mindset—empty mind. Its near egolessness is important for optimal engagement with the preverbal. Elbow says, “Stand out of the way and see what happens” and let “the process itself decide what happens next” (52 and 53)—a reneging of control similar to how Michelangelo allowed the marble to speak: “Every block of stone has a statue inside it, and it is the task of the sculptor to discover it.” The method focuses on ongoing change rather than product and thus prolongs invention. With the Open-Ended Method comes “larger patterns of unfolding”: the piece may constantly shape change, switching genre, mood, tone, approach, audience; or if the

piece doesn't extend but instead tends to "circle" around a certain area, this method can help unfold a range of perspectives; or unfolding can mean "successive versions of a short piece of writing" (so similar to drafts) or a draft of a single, longer piece. The amount of time a piece will take for completion can't be predetermined and can take far longer than expected—not always operating on a convenient time frame. Elbow advises that putting a piece away for awhile is helpful, essentially welcoming a necessary delay: "Anything that takes this long simply to emerge is probably important" (55). That the Open-Ended Method has clear roots in the work of the unconscious is suggested in Elbow's metaphor of a sea voyage and return—with discovering a possible form for a piece (and exiting the Method) as sighting new land. Elbow calls the different bursts of freewriting in the method a "wave of writing" (54). This equation of writing with a movement over water is an archetypal metaphor for the unconscious.

PREWRITING HEURISTIC #3: FELT SENSE

Another way of approaching prewriting involves considering writing as an embodied act. Embodied writing means paying attention to one's shifting physical sensations and the body as it interacts with the material conditions of the writing situation (paper type, utensil, technology, posture in the chair, surface textures of the desk). Including one's physical experience only enlarges the surface of the moment and gives us more to work with in terms of reactions, questions, impulses, ideas, images, and voiced phrases; in contrast, to overlook one's physical experience while writing is to shut off whole areas of potential content. Attention to the body is invariably more peaceful than disembodied writing which can feel panicky; when one isn't aware of the body while writing, one is worrying, usually turning one's thoughts elsewhere and usually to a future critical audience. Keith Hjortshoj has linked lack of awareness of the physical nature of writing to writing blocks: "Like almost everything else that we do, writing is both mental and physical. And if these dimensions of the self in the world are not coordinated, writing will not happen" (10). In addition to impacting the affective experience a writer has of composing (usually increasing calm while writing), embodied writing can function as a powerful form of embodied knowledge, which A. Abby Knoblauch describes as "the sense of knowing something *through* the body and is often sparked by what we might call a 'gut reaction'" (52). That is, embodied writing can help a writer engage intrapersonal voice and attend to intuitive phrases and images which serve as the basis of an early draft. Awareness of one's body while creating can lead to receptiveness to new ideas, an experience denied to individuals who divorce themselves from the physicality of writing (LeMesurier 363; 375-376; Shusterman 8). Prior to the process movement, writing textbooks often cast prewriting as an entirely cerebral activity, and students were told to completely "think a piece through" before starting: *if you're thinking isn't straight, don't bother to start writing*. The page didn't belong

to the writer but was already claimed by critics, teachers, and readers, and the writer operated under the mandate that what was written down needed to be well-organized and coherent. Embodied writing expands the inquiry, increases options and “locations” for invention, develops self-trust, and provides (if needed) distance from critical audiences in our heads.

One established heuristic for embodied invention is the Felt Sense Method which involves exploring the body’s responses in order to move from the preverbal to the first jottings. In essence, felt sense roots the nonverbal in the body of the writer and avoids an overly cerebral, mind-centered approach to generating new material. In *Experiencing and the Creation of Meaning*, Eugene Gendlin proposed that meaning and the discovery of ideas can be experienced in the body. Gendlin described “preconceptual experiencing,” a type of knowing that results from turning inward to an experiencing that is ongoing and readily accessible inside each individual:

There always is the concretely present flow of feeling. At any moment we can individually and privately direct our attention inward, and when we do that, there it is. Of course, we have this or that specific idea, wish, emotion, perception, word, or thought, but we *always* have concrete feeling, an inward sensing whose nature is broader. (11)

In her *Felt Sense: Writing with the Body*, composition scholar Sondra Perl adopts Gendlin’s ideas and applies them to the work of writing. Applied to writing, felt sense theory explores the role of intuition or “how meaning emerges not only from cognition but also from intuition, and how the body itself is implicated in knowing and in the construction of knowledge” (Perl xvi). Felt sense speaks to the preverbal dimension of invention because it is a sensation that first arises in the body, predating exact words, and then accompanies any produced writing as a sort of after-image of physicality. As Perl describes it: “Felt sense exits prior to our language-ing it; it exists alongside the words that come; and it exists as a bodily physical referent after words come.” (9). Words often carry connotations caused from the word’s musicality, embedded imagery, or cultural contexts, but with felt sense, words can be accompanied by the nonverbal—the sensation of meaning or something that stirs our imagination without yet being formulated into language. Perl describes these impulses as “inchoate pushes and pulls, these barely formed preverbal yearnings or leanings” (xiii). This situation also includes moments when the words on the page or screen seem not exactly correct to us. In fact, a common experience of felt sense occurs when a writer senses that something written down isn’t right since “if we can tell that the words that came from our mouth are ‘not what we mean’—we must be comparing those words, ultimately, to something nonverbal. That something has got to be the body or rooted in the body” (Elbow in Perl vi).

In her book, Perl offers guidelines for classroom and individual use of the Felt Sense Method, making accommodations for different lengths of a writing session. It’s crucial that private writing

be used during felt sense—writing that is not shared with anyone after its completion. As a low-stakes heuristic, the Felt Sense Method isn't supposed to generate polished writing but instead what it does provide is “a starting point for engaging in a process that is both creative and meaningful” (Perl xiv). It's an entrance into invention. Felt sense is a particular relation to the rhetorical-creative situation because it sets the individual writer's internal dialog and experience center stage (rather than considering far-off readers). The first prompt directs students to notice their body and breathing; the next prompt asks students to check in with their current emotional states and to observe any obstacles to their writing session. Subsequent prompts are open-ended, for instance, asking students to reflect, “What's on my mind? What am I interested in?” (28). Students are guided through several open-ended brainstorming sessions until they've located a topic or approach, one which resonates in their bodies, which is lingering on the edge of the preverbal. Perl says, “Breathe deeply, repeat the topic to yourself, sense into your body and without writing, see if you can locate where this topic lives in you or what the whole of this issue evokes in you” (29). In order to continue to find material during the session, students are asked to identify intuitively what's missing or still wants to be said about their emerging piece. The session ends in a similarly open-ended fashion—a bridge to the next phase in the process—how to advance the piece in a particular direction.

PREWRITING HEURISTIC #4: YOGA FOR HANDS

In keeping with the notion that writing is a process that doesn't stop at the mind or head, Yoga for Hands is an invention heuristic from my mindful writing blog (alexandriapeary.blogspot.com) that optimizes the writer's attention to the composing present moment. Chiefly, this activity helps draw the writer's attention away from future readers, for it asks the writer to pay attention to his or her fingers, hand, arm, and other parts of the body while he or she handwrites or types—the often overlooked flurry of activity and sensation through which most people's writing occurs. More often than not, thinking about one's fingers as they type would probably do a writer far more good than thinking about any made-up reader. In fact, it's amazing how much activity—the complexity of the physical movements of writing with a hand, the various sound effects like typing or the scrape of a wrist along a sheet of paper, the smell of ink, the warmth of an overheating laptop—surrounds even the most ordinary act of writing, often without our conscious awareness of these sensations as part of our writing environment.

As an embodied heuristic, Yoga for Hands is localized, honing in on one part of the writer's physique. This invention strategy is different than the Felt Sense Method in that it turns to physical awareness to find material for writing and also uses the body as a topic for the freewriting—resembling the “embodied rhetoric” described by Abby Knoblauch except that here body inclusion occurs in a low-stakes private writing and not a revised academic text. In Yoga for Hands, the writer

makes the subject of their freewriting their own bodies. The move between felt sense (or embodied knowledge) and generating words about the body is circular: the writer turns to bodily awareness (and specifically about the hands) to generate words; that generated text in turn promotes bodily consciousness which can result in even more text. By the end of the heuristic, writers are invited to consider other non-hand related writing tasks—pieces they would like to write. The heuristic establishes a present-focused state in the writer, one without the taxation of audience, and in that calm, he or she is likely better able to approach the desired writing project.

The method begins with a brief seated meditation in which the writer is asked to draw attention to the breath. Next, the writer is asked to move their hands to a keyboard or piece of paper and begin an open freewrite on any topic while maintaining an awareness of the breath. In mid-stream of this freewrite, the writer is asked to turn their attention to the sensation of their fingers touching the keys, pen, or pencil and to change the topic of the freewrite to describing this sensation for a minute. The focus of the freewrite then turns to the sound effects of the typing or handwriting. Then the writer is asked to sequentially move their attention from the bones of their writing fingers (watching the complexity of their activity), the palm, back of the hands, wrist, lower arms, torso, legs, shoulders, neck, and finally the face. Concerning the face, the writer is asked to notice how the act of writing is impacting its muscular movements, tensions, and changes in temperature. Afterwards, the writer is guided to continue the observation of the breathing and to return to their day's project.

In conclusion, turning to this larger body of unknowing makes room for instinct, impulses, intuitions, or those flashes of language (voice and idea) which might not be noticed in a cognitive space consigned to more external considerations. Prewriting is as much a teachable part of the time line of process, the chronology of writing, as feedback or revision. Prewriting is a needed complement to the more directive exercises provided by instructors: our students won't always have us around to hand them ideas for how to start, but they will have life-long access to the preverbal. The cognitive terrain of prewriting—a one-dimensional, highly generative surface—is a site of tremendous creative energy, for both the conscious and unconscious parts of the writer's mind. In this disposition toward discovery, the intertextual—overheard and read language of other people—flits and crosses dotted lines of internal voice. Small abstract shapes begin to occupy the scene; each shape is in a state of metamorphosis and so is the text, a new piece which emerges on the suddenly apparent horizon. *Wisps of language, tendrils of voice, a thread to an idea.*

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