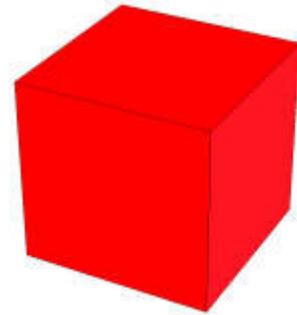


## How to Write in “Chunks”

By

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I have an acquaintance who submitted a manuscript of a memoir to a publisher. It was rejected. However, the rejection letter did contain specific reasons for not accepting the manuscript for publication. The writer is now in the process of rewriting the work in anticipation of submitting it to another publisher.



Here's the challenge, from our point of view. The memoir is about the person's education in a military style school from grades three through twelve. That is a big swatch of time to recall and commit to paper, especially when the person graduated from the school a half century ago, and the school closed almost 30 years ago. Yes, the educational process he experienced was linear; it occurred over a period of time and had a start and finish. Moreover, when it's published, a reader expects to approach the memoir expecting to read a similar linear approach. However, that does not mean that the memoir has to be written that way.

We suggest that the episodes to be included in the memoir be separated into “chunks” and then a decision can be made as to where each should be inserted into the manuscript at specific points on the narrative arc. Here's how.

Let's assume that the following "scenes" will be included in the memoir. This is not an inclusive list.

1. A typical academic day
2. A typical day militarily
3. The physical school building
4. The neighborhood
5. Home life and family
6. Sport programs
7. Teachers & administrators
8. The school's history
9. Relationships
10. An epiphany

### **Here's How to Create "Chunks"**

More than 20 years ago, I took a course called *Breakthrough Writing*. The instructor was Bernard Asbell, and he was a professor of English and the author of a number of historical books and articles. He travelled the northeast, promoting *Breakthrough Writing*, a method for isolating the creative and critical parts of the brain to help people get their thoughts on paper. For me, his method pretty much debunked the idea of writer's block. However, first a flashback.

From the time I attended elementary school, through high school and then college, the teachers who taught writing used a method that went something like this: "A sentence is a complete thought with a subject, a predicate, and an indirect object. A sentence has a capital letter at the beginning and a period at the end."

Notice the complete absence of anything creative, which should be the soul of any serious writing effort.

Over the years since, Mr. Asbell's "breakthrough writing" has evolved into "freewriting."

Both use techniques designed to help you address misconceptions about putting your thoughts on paper. Mr. Asbell showed how to separate the creative and critical aspects of writing. I still use his techniques. Here's how they work.

## Freewriting

Let's start with writing about a typical academic day at this military school. You know the topic well because you were there and can recall many of the day-to-day details. You are the Subject Matter Expert (SME).

You have a topic. Here's the freewriting process.

1. Sit comfortably at a table with a pencil (or pen) and a pad of paper. (A number two pencil and a yellow legal pad are great mates!)
2. Set a kitchen timer or the alarm on your cell phone, to count down from ten minutes and place it out of your line of sight.
3. Start the timer and begin writing. Write at your normal pace.
4. Caveats: Do not worry about spelling, punctuation, coherence or any of the grammatical bugaboos normally associated with a finished piece of writing. No one is going to read this freewrite.
5. Most important. Do not stop writing until the timer rings. Write at an easy pace. Take your time. If you can't think of what to write, then write, "I can't think of what to write" until something comes to mind.
6. When the timer rings, put down the pencil.

Breakthrough writing or freewriting is a worry free way to turn a blank piece of paper into 500-plus "chunk" of content with potential. (An 8.5" X 14" legal pad has 37 lines. Figure ten words per line equals 370 words per page.)

Now you have 500-plus words on a legal pad. Next, read what you have written. As you read, identify and underline those thoughts, sentences, or key words that support your thesis and have merit for developing your essay.

On the next blank page, write down those three best tips. Take a breath, reset the timer for another five minutes, start it, and write again, concentrating on adding more detail to support each of those three tips.

When the timer rings for the second time, you should have sufficient draft material to start forming your essay. This process works repeatedly and here's why.

## How It Works

Two things happen. One, you are writing what you know. Two, realizing that no one will see the initial draft is a big plus. It's like opening a faucet in your head and letting the water flow down your arm, through the pencil and onto the page. Truly, the process of a Number 2 pencil inching its soft lead way left to right across a yellow legal pad I find inspiring.

When you have completed the second pass on paper, you can don your critical cap and begin to organize the creative glop your freewriting produced, which raises the topic of organization, specifically outlining.

In a way, freewriting helps you outline. For example, if I'm confident about my topic, I'll follow the freewriting steps laid out above as they create their own foundation for developing a topic, whether it's called an outline, a backbone, or a skeleton, whatever.

## Arranging Your "Chunks"

My approach to revising this memoir would be to create ten "chunks" as numbered above. I'd name each and save it separately. I'd try to have each "chunk" about 1,500 words in length, 250 words per printed page, and a total of five –to-six pages. When you combine all ten "chunks," you'll have a draft of approximately 15,000 words.

Now, as we said earlier, the education process was linear and the reader expects something similar when they read because they expect the work to be coherent. However, you also want to grab the reader's attention. There are a couple of ways of doing this.

One way is to begin the work with what is called *in media res*, Latin for in the middle of things. For example, perhaps there was an event in the author's junior year that he saw as an epiphany. Now the epiphany is number ten on the "chunk" list, but if it is exciting enough it could be used to start the work and grab the reader's attention. You write flashbacks and return the reader to the beginning of the educational journey.

In written works for which the theme is coming of age, or a rite of passage, the narrative arc has another feature. For the protagonist to navigate the rite of passage, he or she must be removed from his or her comfortable surroundings. There are real life examples of such rites.

For example, similar to the Aborigine practice of sending young men to fend for themselves in the wilderness although not nearly as involved, many Native American tribes would send their young men off into the wild for several days during a period of intense fasting in order to find direction for their lives and become adults.

For the memoir about the school, it could open with the protagonist being escorted to the school by his parents and he relates what he see and hears and the emotions that sweep him up in this totally unexpected setting. The subsequent chapter, through a flashback, could describe the school's founding and its physical setting followed by what the author considers the next appropriate "chunk."

### **A Less Frenetic Approach**

Sitting at your computer and trying to recall and write about an experience and make sure that it is accurate is nuts! Unless you have total recall, you'll get frustrated, angry and possibly quit, and the regret your failure.

Your life happens in "chunks," so write about it in "chunks." Your first day of school, you have no idea what the next eight, ten or twelve years will bring. Neither does your reader. It's your job as the writer to take them by the hand and lead them down that path, page-by-page, episode by episode, conflict by conflict.

It's important not to get so overwhelmed by what you are trying to write that it's better to mow the lawn, or cook supper, or go to the mall for the invigorating walk. Writing is like life. It comes one day at a time, it comes in pieces, and you can reconstruct those pieces into a narrative people will want to read and will enjoy reading. So go write and write in chunks.