

Notice, also, that *responding* requires you to step forward and take some risks as a writer. You can't hide behind your sources, and you *shouldn't* let what anyone else has said be last word on your subject. In fact, the word "essay" is derived from the French verb, *essayer*, which means to "try" or "attempt." The inventor of the essay, the French philosopher Michel De Montaigne (1533-1592), said in his *Les Essais*, "I quote others only in order to express myself more fully." Make that your motto and you will never go wrong in your use of sources.

When you submit an essay for a grade, it should be the best work that you can do. But tomorrow, you will reread that same essay and see you could have done something better – more insightful, more entertaining, or more stylish. When that happens, you know that you are really on board the freedom train. Good luck!

- Roger Stritmatter, PhD

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Postscript

Framing responses to your reading can be a challenge. For some assistance, please see appendix A, which gives you a set of templates for wording summaries, quotations, and responses.

For additional information on Frederick Douglass and his autobiography, consult your online resources.

PETER ELBOW

Peter Elbow (1935-) was educated at Williams College, Brandeis, Harvard, and Oxford. A noted director of college writing programs, Elbow started a highly acclaimed "Workshop in Language and Thinking" at Bard College. He has published numerous articles about writing and several books, including *Writing without Teachers* (1973) and *Writing with Power* (1981).

Desperation Writing

BEFORE YOU READ: In this section from *Writing without Teachers*, Peter Elbow offers advice to students writing under stress. Facing deadlines, many students feel almost paralyzed, unable to even start an assignment. Elbow presents his recommendations in the form of a process.

TIPS FOR READING: Think of times when you have had trouble writing because you could not organize your ideas. Elbow offers suggestions such as writing single ideas on small pieces of paper or 3 × 5 cards that you can shuffle or rearrange to discover new relationships between them. This technique may help you with complicated assignments like research papers when you have to juggle opinions, facts, and ideas from a number of sources.

Words to Know:

recurring	repeating
coherent	clear
hindrance	block
out of commission	not working
incapable	unable
perception	understanding
assertion	statement
comatose	passed out, exhausted
mulling	think over
invariably	always
exert	use
intuition	instinct
deploy	spread out, use
subsidiary	secondary, minor
configuration	pattern or design
associative	dependent on association or relationships

"Desperation Writing" from *WRITING WITHOUT TEACHERS* by Peter Elbow. Copyright © 1973, 1996 by Peter Elbow, NY: Oxford University Press.

metaphor
refrain
intrudes

figure of speech
hold back
enters without being welcome

1 I know I am not alone in my recurring twinges of panic that I won't be able to write something when I need to, I won't be able to produce coherent speech or thought. And that lingering doubt is a great hindrance to writing. It's a constant fog or static that clouds the mind. I never got out of its clutches till I discovered that it was possible to write something—not something great or pleasing but at least something usable, workable—when my mind is out of commission. The trick is that you have to do all your cooking out on the table: Your mind is incapable of doing any inside. It means using symbols and pieces of paper not as a crutch but as a wheelchair.

2 The first thing is to admit your condition: Because of some mood or event or whatever, your mind is incapable of anything that could be called thought. It can put out a babbling kind of speech utterance, it can put a simple feeling, perception or sort-of-thought into understandable (though terrible) words. But it is incapable of considering anything in relation to anything else. The moment you try to hold that thought or feeling up against some other to see the relationship, you simply lose the picture—you get nothing but buzzing lines or waving colors.

3 So admit this. Avoid anything more than one feeling, perception, or thought. Simply write as much as possible. Try simply to steer your mind in the direction or general vicinity of the thing you are trying to write about and start writing and keep writing.

4 Just write and keep writing. (Probably best to write on only one side of the paper in case you should want to cut parts out with scissors—but you probably won't.) Just write and keep writing. It will probably come in waves. After a flurry, stop and take a brief rest. But don't stop too long. Don't think about what you are writing or what you have written or else you will overload the circuit again. Keep writing as though you are drugged or drunk. Keep doing this till you feel you have a lot of material that might be useful; or, if necessary, till you can't stand it any more—even if you doubt that there's anything useful there.

5 Then take a pad of little pieces of paper—or perhaps 3×5 cards—and simply start at the beginning of what you were writing, and as you read over what you wrote, every time you come to any thought, feeling, perception, or image that could be gathered up into one sentence or one assertion, do so and write it by itself on a little sheet of paper. In short, you are trying to turn, say, ten or twenty pages of wandering mush into twenty or thirty hard

little crab apples. Sometimes there won't be many on a page. But if it seems to you that there are none on a page, you are making a serious error—the same serious error that put you in this comatose state to start with. You are mistaking lousy, stupid, second-rate, wrong, childish, foolish, worthless ideas for no ideas at all. Your job is not to pick out *good* ideas but to pick out ideas. As long as you were conscious, your words will be full of things that could be called feelings, utterances, ideas—things that can be squeezed into one simple sentence. This is your job. Don't ask for too much.

6 After you have done this, take those little slips or cards, read through them a number of times—not struggling with them, simply wandering and mulling through them; perhaps shifting them around and looking through in various sequences. In a sense these are cards you are playing solitaire with, and the rules of this particular game permit shuffling the unused pile.

7 The goal of this procedure with the cards is to get them to distribute themselves in two or three or ten or fifteen different piles on your desk. You can get them to do this almost by themselves if you simply keep reading through them in different orders; certain cards will begin to feel like they go with other cards. I emphasize this passive, thoughtless mode because I want to talk about desperation writing in its pure state. In practice, almost invariably at some point in the procedure, your sanity begins to return. It is often at this point. You actually are moved to have thoughts or—and the difference between active and passive is crucial here—to *exert* thought; to hold two cards together and *build* or *assert* a relationship. It is a matter of bringing energy to bear.

8 So you may start to be able to do something active with these cards, and begin actually to think. But if not, just allow the cards to find their own piles with each other by feel, by drift, by intuition, by mindlessness.

9 You have now engaged in the two main activities that will permit you to get something cooked out on the table rather than in your brain: writing out into messy words, summing up into single assertions, and even sensing relationships between assertions. You can simply continue to deploy these two activities.

10 If, for example, after the first round of writing, assertion-making, and pile-making, your piles feel as though they are useful and satisfactory for what you are writing—paragraphs or sections or trains of thought—then you can carry on from there. See if you can gather each pile up into a single assertion. When you can, then put the subsidiary assertions of that pile into their best order to fit with that single unifying one. If you *can't* get the pile into one assertion, then take the pile as the basis for doing some more writing out into words. In the course of this writing, you may produce for

yourself the single unifying assertion you were looking for; or you may have to go through the cycle of turning the writing into assertions and piles and so forth. Perhaps more than once. The pile may turn out to want to be two or more piles itself; or it may want to become part of a pile you already have. This is natural. This kind of meshing into one configuration, then coming apart, then coming together and meshing into a different configuration—this is growing and cooking. It makes a terrible mess, but if you can't do it in your head, you have to put up with a cluttered desk and a lot of confusion.

If, on the other hand, all that writing *did* have useful material in it, it means that your writing wasn't loose, drifting, quirky, jerky, associative enough. This time try especially to let things simply remind you of things that are seemingly crazy or unrelated. Follow these odd associations. Make as many metaphors as you can—be as nutty as possible—and explore the metaphors themselves—open them out. You may have all your energy tied up in some area of your experience that you are leaving out. Don't refrain from writing about whatever else is on your mind: how you feel at the moment, what you are losing your mind over, randomness that intrudes itself on your consciousness, the pattern on the wallpaper, what those people you see out the window have on their minds—though keep coming back to the whatever it is you are supposed to be writing about. Treat it, in short, like ten-minute writing exercises. Your best perceptions and thoughts are always going to be tied up in whatever is really occupying you, and that is also where your energy is. You may end up writing a love poem—or a hate poem—in one of those little piles while the other piles will finally turn into a lab report on data processing or whatever you have to write about. But you couldn't, in your present state of having your head shot off, have written that report without also writing the poem. And the report will have some of the juice of the poem in it and vice versa.

Understanding Meaning

1. What is Elbow's purpose?
2. What problems does Elbow want to help students to overcome?
3. Do you find this advice helpful? Would you use it?
4. **CRITICAL THINKING.** What does Elbow's essay reveal to you about the writing process? Why is it important to see writing as a process and not merely a product?

Evaluating Strategy

1. Does the opening adequately demonstrate the need for this process?
2. Are the stages or steps clearly defined?
3. How does Elbow signal transitions?

Appreciating Language

1. Elbow writes of ideas that are "lousy" and "stupid" but still have value. What is he trying to indicate to students with these word choices?
2. Judging by the language, what audience, what type of student, is this essay targeted to?

Writing Suggestions

1. Experiment with the freewriting process Elbow describes. Select a topic, and write nonstop for at least ten minutes. Afterward underline the ideas you came up with while writing.
2. **COLLABORATIVE WRITING.** Talk about writing with a group of students. Discuss working methods. Take notes on the tips you feel are helpful. Work with others to craft these tips into a process essay.

GARRISON KEILLOR

Almost single-handedly, Garrison Keillor (1942–) revived the radio variety show in an era of films and television. In *A Prairie Home Companion*, which is broadcast on National Public Radio every Saturday night, Keillor popularized the mythical community of Lake Wobegon. His homespun humor and whimsical social commentary can also be found in such books as *Happy to Be Here* (1982), *Lake Wobegon Days* (1985), *Leaving Home: A Collection of Lake Wobegon Stories* (1987), *We Are Still Married* (1989), *WLT: A Radio Romance* (1992), *The Book of Guys* (1993), *Wobegon Boy* (1996), and *Me: By Jimmy (Big Boy) Valente* (1999).

How to Write a Letter

BEFORE YOU READ: In this age of cell phones and e-mail, the personal letter has almost become a thing of the past. Consider, however, what a letter can do that a phone call or electronic message cannot.

TIPS FOR READING: Keillor does not provide a numbered list of the steps in the process of writing a letter. Follow him as he first explains the need for writing letters and then goes into the process itself, letting breaks between paragraphs signal a move from one idea to the next.

Words to Know:

wahoo	an ignorant person
sensuous	appealing to the senses
lit'ry	short for <i>literary</i> , or having to do with literature

TIPS FOR WRITING: You may want a method more subtle than a numbered list to explain a process. Keillor explains the process of writing a letter from start to finish without resorting to such a numbered list.

- 1 We shy persons need to write a letter now and then, or else we'll dry up and blow away. It's true. And I speak as one who loves to reach for the phone, dial the number, and talk. I say, "Big Bopper here—what's shakin', babes?" The telephone is to shyness what Hawaii is to February, it's a way out of the woods, *and yet*: a letter is better.
- 2 Such a sweet gift—a piece of handmade writing, in an envelope that is not a bill, sitting in our friend's path when she trudges home from a long

"How to Write a Letter" by Garrison Keillor from *WE ARE STILL MARRIED*, published by Viking Penguin Inc. (Originally titled "How to Write a Personal Letter.") Copyright © 1987 by International Paper Company. Reprinted by permission.

day spent among wahoos and savages, a day our words will help repair. They don't need to be immortal, just sincere. She can read them twice and again tomorrow: *You're someone I care about, Corinne, and think of often and every time I do you make me smile.*

3 We need to write, otherwise nobody will know who we are. They will have only a vague impression of us as A Nice Person, because, frankly; we don't shine at conversation, we lack the confidence to thrust our faces forward and say, "Hi, I'm Heather Hooten; let me tell you about my week." Mostly we say "Uh-huh" and "Oh, really." People smile and look over our shoulder, looking for someone else to meet.

4 So a shy person sits down and writes a letter. To be known by another person—to meet and talk freely on the page—to be close despite distance. To escape from anonymity and be our own sweet selves and express the music of our souls.

5 Same thing that moves a giant rock star to sing his heart out in front of 123,000 people moves us to take ballpoint in hand and write a few lines to our dear Aunt Eleanor. *We want to be known.* We want her to know that we have fallen in love, that we quit our job, that we're moving to New York, and we want to say a few things that might not get said in casual conversation: *Thank you for what you've meant to me, I am very happy right now.*

6 The first step in writing letters is to get over the guilt of *not* writing. You don't "owe" anybody a letter. Letters are a gift. The burning shame you feel when you see unanswered mail makes it harder to pick up a pen and makes for a cheerless letter when you finally do. *I feel bad about not writing, but I've been so busy,* etc. Skip this. Few letters are obligatory, and they are *Thanks for the wonderful gift and I am terribly sorry to hear about George's death* and *Yes, you're welcome to stay with us next month,* and not many more than that. Write those promptly if you want to keep your friends. Don't worry about the others, except love letters, of course. When your true love writes, *Dear Light of My Life, Joy of My Heart, O Lovely Pulsating Core of My Sensate Life,* some response is called for.

7 Some of the best letters are tossed off in a burst of inspiration, so keep your writing stuff in one place where you can sit down for a few minutes and (*Dear Roy, I am in the middle of a book entitled We Are Still Married but thought I'd drop you a line. Hi to your sweetie, too*) dash off a note to a pal. Envelopes, stamps, address book, everything in a drawer so you can write fast when the pen is hot.

8 A blank white eight-by-eleven sheet can look as big as Montana if the pen's not so hot—try a smaller page and write boldly. Or use a note card with a piece of fine art on the front; if your letter ain't good, at least they get

the Matisse. Get a pen that makes a sensuous line, get a comfortable typewriter, a friendly word processor—whichever feels easy to the hand.

9 Sit for a few minutes with the blank sheet in front of you, and meditate on the person you will write to, let your friend come to mind until you can almost see her or him in the room with you. Remember the last time you saw each other and how your friend looked and what you said and what perhaps was unsaid between you, and when your friend becomes real to you, start to write.

10 Write the salutation—*Dear You*—and take a deep breath and plunge in. A simple declarative sentence will do, followed by another and another and another. Tell us what you're doing and tell it like you were talking to us. Don't think about grammar, don't think about lit'ry style, don't try to write dramatically, just give us your news. Where did you go, who did you see, what did they say, what do you think?

11 If you don't know where to begin, start with the present moment: *I'm sitting at the kitchen table on a rainy Saturday morning. Everyone is gone and the house is quiet.* Let your simple description of the present moment lead to something else, let the letter drift gently along.

12 The toughest letter to crank out is one that is meant to impress, as we all know from writing job applications; if it's hard work to slip off a letter to a friend, maybe you're trying too hard to be terrific. A letter is only a report to someone who already likes you for reasons other than your brilliance. Take it easy.

13 Don't worry about form. It's not a term paper. When you come to the end of one episode, just start a new paragraph. You can go from a few lines about the sad state of pro football to the fight with your mother to your fond memories of Mexico to your cat's urinary-tract infection to a few thoughts on personal indebtedness and on to the kitchen sink and what's in it. The more you write, the easier it gets, and when you have a True True Friend to write to, a *compadre*, a soul sibling, then it's like driving a car down a country road, you just get behind the keyboard and press on the gas.

14 Don't tear up the page and start over when you write a bad line—try to write your way out of it. Make mistakes and plunge on. Let the letter cook along and let yourself be bold. Outrage, confusion, love—whatever is in your mind, let it find a way to the page. Writing is a means of discovery, always, and when you come to the end and write *Yours ever or Hugs and kisses,* you'll know something you didn't when you wrote *Dear Pal.*

15 Probably your friend will put your letter away, and it'll be read again a few years from now—and it will improve with age. And forty years from now, your friend's grandkids will dig it out of the attic and read it, a sweet and precious relic of the ancient eighties that gives them a sudden clear

glimpse of you and her and the world we old-timers knew. You will then have created an object of art. Your simple lines about where you went, who you saw, what they said, will speak to those children and they will feel in their hearts the humanity of our times.

You can't pick up a phone and call the future and tell them about our times. You have to pick up a piece of paper.

Understanding Meaning

1. What does Keillor say in the first four paragraphs about why shy people need to write letters? Why is a letter better than a phone call?
2. What positive things can a letter do for the person who receives it?
3. What situations does Keillor say require writing a letter?
4. What advice does Keillor give his readers to help them get past any discomfort they might feel about starting a letter?
5. What, according to Keillor, should the writer of a letter not do?
6. At the end, why does he say the letter may have a lasting significance?
7. *CRITICAL THINKING.* In this age of e-mail and cell phones, is Keillor's advice outdated? Why or why not?

Evaluating Strategy

1. Why is it ironic that this particular author presents himself as a shy person?
2. How does Keillor make writing a letter sound easy while at the same time making clear how much a letter can mean to the person it is written to?
3. Keillor does not provide a numbered list of steps. Is the process of writing a letter made clear anyway? Explain.
4. Why does Keillor make use of italics?

Appreciating Language

1. Does Keillor sometimes break rules that English teachers try to teach us, like always writing in complete sentences? What effect does that have on the essay?
2. How does Keillor's word choice make readers feel that he is speaking very directly to them, in an informal manner?
3. Does Keillor's language sometimes seem exaggerated? Where? Does that weaken the effect of the essay?

Writing Suggestions

1. Write a paragraph in which you describe your experience as a letter writer. Was there a point at which e-mail took over, and you stopped writing letters?
2. *COLLABORATIVE WRITING.* Keillor says that we write to be known. Today we tend to know some of our correspondents primarily through their electronic messages. Work with your group to make a list of clues that you get from e-mail about the type of person who is writing.
3. Use what you learned in Writing Suggestion #2 above to write one to two paragraphs in which you explain how writers are "known" through clues they provide in their e-mails.