

# Chapter 29. Exercises for Improving Writing Dispositions

## In this Chapter

About These Writing Exercises

Solve writing problems reflectively

Avoid high expectations

Practice persistence

29.1 Attitude Inventory

29.2 Deluxe Project Scheduler

29.3 Funny Story

29.4 Gaining a Growth Mindset

29.5 Learn-Write Timeline

29.6 Problem Solver Parallels

29.7 Remix/Mashup

29.8 Values Freewrite

29.9 Write the Problem

We can think about “exercises” two ways, as skill-building and as simple movement. We know that reflective writers need deliberate practice to improve: after all, writing doesn’t happen with just one big swoop of words landing on a page, but with deliberate moves and approaches assembled over time. Practicing writing shares many characteristics with other kinds of practice: like shooting free throws, drawing faces, piping frosting, calculating cosines, or identifying cells, writing practice requires guidance, focus, repetition, and connection to a larger goal. Writers gain confidence and insight when we practice particular skills, either skills we most need for our work at the moment or skills we struggle with most.

## Solve writing problems reflectively

As reflective writers, we also know that when we’re stuck, we don’t have “writer’s block”—instead, we just have a problem we need to figure out. The exercises in this section are designed to support that problem-solving process. They can help writers DEAL with being stuck, by

- Defining a problem,



- Exploring some options for addressing it,
- Acting by trying out a new approach for 20 minutes or so, and
- Learning how to apply that new idea where it's helpful.

When we take deliberate, reflective, writing-focused action (rather than checking our messages or staring at the cursor blinking on the screen), we can lower our stress, gain a fresh perspective or increased energy, and move forward to new and productive insights.

### Avoid high expectations

Practice may “make perfect,” but practice work should never strive to *be* perfect. When you exercise as a writer, try to ignore small errors in word choice or punctuation, and try not to worry about whether you're getting the “right” answers. Just keep writing answers.

### Practice persistence

You need to persist in a single exercise long enough to prompt your brain to release or create ideas you weren't aware you had. You might set a timer, and work as hard as you can for 20 or 30 minutes. You also need to persist across time, whether you repeat the same exercise multiple times or engage in different exercises at multiple points during a writing project.

Whether you use these exercises to strengthen your skills or to build more flexible processes, you can improve your current project and gain more fluency as a writer overall.

## 29.1 Attitude Inventory

### *Define your goal*

Use this exercise to identify and respond to attitudes or judgments about your approach to writing that may be limiting your development as a writer.

### *Background*

In order to help writers learn, teachers and tutors not only explain “rules” which turn out not to be rules (such as “always put your thesis at the end of your first paragraph”), but they also suggest strategies or describe processes that turn out not to be useful for all writers at all times (such as “always write an outline before starting to draft an essay”). In trying to be helpful, these writing coaches can unintentionally make writers feel worse when those writers fall short or fail in the recommended practices.



If you hear this kind of advice, you might begin to think that you are a “bad writer” because you don’t follow advice, or because you don’t succeed when you try to follow the advice. Writers can have lower **confidence** and **curiosity** when we place limits on ourselves as we write. However, advanced writers can work to discover our own productive writing practices, and in order to do so, we may need to let go of negative attitudes and judgments that are holding us back.

### *Take action*

**Write about your past writing** in response to two or three of the questions below. Be as honest as you can: when you remember a story or an example, take the time to explain it.

- Do you worry even before you start a writing project that you’ll be “doing it wrong”?
- Do you ever write “out of order” or using steps or strategies that you’re not “supposed to” use?
- Do you ever get frustrated because you follow writing steps exactly the way an instructor or book recommends, or the way your friends write, but your grades or results aren’t as strong as you hoped?
- On some writing tasks, do you “force yourself” to write in a way that goes against what you feel or believe is right?
- Do you ever critique yourself for “probably doing it wrong” in the middle of a writing project?
- Are there some kinds of writing you do that you know you can do well at and look forward to, for school or outside of school, and other kinds that you think you do poorly at and/or dread doing?
- Do you ever set clear rules for yourself about how to get your writing projects done, and critique yourself when you don’t meet those rules?
- Were you ever surprised when you used writing strategies that used to be successful for you and they turned out not to produce successful results in a new situation?

**Write to tell yourself a new story:** Since you know that “there is no single definition of a good writer” and “good writers frequently struggle and revise,” you’re ready to tell yourself a new story. Take five minutes to write a paragraph to give yourself some new advice: What could you say to yourself the next time you hear your self-judgment voices in your head telling you that you’re doing it all wrong or that you need to limit yourself to a single strategy? How could you create a voice that helps you see a range of ways to “write it right”? What phrases could remind you to be patient with yourself as a writer and give yourself permission to experiment, struggle, innovate, fail, revise, and adapt? Which of your strategies

that often make you feel better about yourself or your writing can you call on to help you counteract the negative voices?

### *Reflect to learn and connect*

Finish by making a plan: The next time you start to feel like a “bad writer,” what will you do to remind yourself how you can improve your disposition?

### *Explore related exercises*

Believing/Doubting, Seven Generations, Values Freewrite

## 29.2 Deluxe Project Scheduler



### *Define your goal*

Use this exercise to create a realistic, flexible, motivating, relevant schedule for completing a writing project.

### *Background*

Writers can benefit from looking ahead and marking due-dates on our calendars; sometimes advanced writers plan out times to do individual project steps. This planning activity is part of what scholars call “becoming a self-regulated learner”: someone who takes charge of their own steps and processes. **Self-regulation** can also improve your **confidence** and **persistence**. A regular calendar can help, but like a New Year’s Resolution to exercise more, eat less, or meditate daily, a simple calendar notation can be easy to ignore or schedule over, so you may need a stronger approach.

### *Take action*

The deluxe calendar below features several self-regulating approaches not available from a simple date/task schedule. By using a calendar like this, you can

- **Identify the problems** that need solving, to link the task to a clear reason/goal
- **Predict your whole project**, including multiple facets and possible challenges
- **Describe multiple stages** of a writing project, to emphasize the benefits of a recursive process
- **Schedule** specific, relevant, completable tasks, so that you can take one step at a time
- **Reflect to predict** difficulty or resistance, so that you can locate necessary time and resources for key stages

- **Connect** to specific benefits to help with your motivation and persistence

**Create an opening description** for your calendar that identifies key features of your project:

- Project:
- Genre:
- Audience:
- Main goal/argument:
- Most similar recent writing success:

**Create a table** like the one below that emphasizes the DEAL framework of reflective writers: Define a problem, Explore possible steps or strategies, Act to move the project forward, and Learn how to do the next step or project.

- Add some dates to define the early, middle, and late sections in your upcoming writing project schedule. If you want to add some more “early-middle” or “late-middle” dates, you can do so.
- Fill in at least three cells in each row with specific directions
- At least once per row, add a reflective note to yourself to help you approach the work with a growth mindset:
- “One challenge I anticipate here is \_\_\_\_\_”
- “One benefit of working on this now is \_\_\_\_\_”

	Define the problem: My main writing challenge overall at this point is likely to be = _____	Explore resources: One reading, thinking, learning, or inquiring task I could do at this point = _____	Explore strategies: One strategy or exercise I could use at this point = _____	Take specific action: One section of the document that could be drafted or revised now = _____	Reflect and learn: One element to rethink, re-view, revise, or reenergize at this point = _____
Do this early: before _____ [date]					
Do this in the middle: before _____ [date]					
Do this near the end: before _____ [date]					

*Reflect to learn and connect*

When you're finished, kick off your project by writing a three-day plan to get going. In the next 3 days, spending at least 20 minutes per day, what steps could you take that help get you to your next goal(s)?

*Explore related exercises*

Attitude Inventory, Magic Three Choices, Remix/Mashup

## 29.3 Funny Story

*Define your goal*

Use this exercise to shift your frame of mind toward the positive in order to enable your work on your writing project.

*Background*

In the same way that smiling uses muscles that trigger your brain's happiness centers even if you are fake-smiling, writing about something cheerful can reorient you away from your frustrations about your major writing project. Use this updated view to help you increase your **confidence**, **motivation**, or **persistence**.

*Take action*

Take a break from your formal writing project to freewrite (writing steadily without worrying about correctness or precision) for 15-20 minutes about a funny event or story: a "you had to be there" moment when all your friends ended up in giggles, your tenth birthday party, a classic scene from your favorite movie or TV show, something silly that your nephew said or did as a toddler, or a video someone shared with you recently. Don't *explain* why it is funny: just tell the story ("So there was this aardvark . . ."). If you run out of one story and have time left, write another story about a different funny episode.

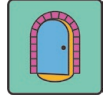
*Reflect to learn and connect*

When your freewriting time is done, write several sentences to take advantage of your improved, more positive attitude: what do you *like best* or *feel most connected to* about your current writing project? Why might it be interesting or useful to your readers? What part of it could you try working on now to stay with that feeling of connection?

*Explore related exercises*

Emperor For a Day, Genre Switch, Inner Three-Year-Old

## 29.4 Gaining a Growth Mindset



### Define your goal

Use this exercise to shift your mental frame toward a problem-solving mode.

### Background

Researcher Carol Dweck, among others, has demonstrated in study after study that people with a “growth mindset” (those who believe they can improve their performance by learning and practicing better strategies) succeed at a far better rate than people with a “fixed mindset” (those who believe they only have a certain amount of talent or intelligence in one area). She and others have also demonstrated that a “growth mindset” can be learned by anyone in any situation.

Dweck acknowledges that “growth mindset” people with plentiful resources—time, money, health, or emotional support—often have more opportunities than those with fewer resources, but she focuses on what people can immediately change about their situation, which is their mindset. This alternate view can help you increase your **confidence**, **self-regulation**, and **persistence**.

### Take action

**Look back:** Take a look at your own work so far on your project, and write a few sentences about what is *not going well right now*. Where are you stuck, what is frustrating, and/or why are you worried it might not go well?

**Look outward:** Take just a few minutes to look at a piece of writing by someone else that you admire in some way: it can be a reading for a class you’re taking, a peer’s essay, a funny online post, or another document you read recently. Write a sentence or two about *what is going well* in that piece of writing: what do you admire, enjoy, or wish you could do?

**Think strategically:** Now imagine, with as much determination as you can, that this other writer is not by nature any more talented, intelligent, or lucky than you are—that at least in the case of this one piece of writing, they were simply someone who was *using better strategies for writing* than you are using right now, the way a music group that has rehearsed for six months will perform better than an equally capable one that has just met. You have to play a believing game here about how “you can become a good writer and a better writer.”

Get specific in your imagining, and write a sentence or two: *What sorts of strategies might* that other writer have practiced particularly hard at? What decisions and practices *might* have led to the kind of writing you admire? Perhaps this writer works hard to be aware of rhetorical strategies like assessing what readers need or understanding how a genre works. Perhaps this writer uses knowledge

strategies to consider and respond to complicated or resistant views. Maybe this writer took extra process steps to generate a number of possible ideas before settling on one, or to revise several times to get the structure or language just right. Or it could be that this writer had good disposition strategies: they looked for ways to connect their interests to the project to stay motivated, or they were deliberate in making time to consult with others.

**Look inward:** Remind yourself that your goal as a writer is to improve your writing strategies just a little bit. Write a few sentences: which of the strategies that you just listed could you try to improve on as you work on your current project? How do you think using each strategy better might help you with the problem(s) you identified at the start of this exercise?

### *Reflect to learn and connect*

Finish by *looking ahead*: The next time you lose confidence—as a writer, or in some other area of your life—how can you remind yourself that your job is to *keep growing* rather than to *be perfect right now*?

### *Explore related exercises*

Deluxe Project Scheduler, Scenarios, Seven Generations

## 29.5 Learn-Write Timeline



### *Define your goal*

Use this exercise to create a writing plan that integrates writing with learning, so that each form of work assists the other.

### *Background*

Writers often anticipate doing all their learning first, and all their writing last, either because they find learning easier than writing and are procrastinating the harder work, or because they are afraid to write something incorrect due to a lack of learning. Not only is this approach a kind of trap—there is always “one more book/article to read” or “one more data analysis to run”—but it prevents writers from taking advantage of writing-to-learn and writing part of a document strategies that can help improve thinking and time management. Moreover, writing often *undoes* or *calls into question* previous learning, provoking a need for additional inquiry and then further writing in an ongoing cycle. Making a plan like this can help with **self-regulation** and **persistence**.

### *Take action*

**Build your plan:** Create a three-column grid like the one below; include at



least four or five dates or timeline points. You may spread your dates out evenly throughout your (remaining) time before your project is due, or you may work out a short timeline for just part of the process.

Date/Time	Learning/Research Goal	Writing Goal
Tuesday	Locate three credible sources about the causes of the flooding	Write two paragraphs “off on a rant” about why floods are a problem for Arlington residents
Friday		
Monday		

**Identify your learning/research goals:** Be as specific as you can, and consider setting goals that begin with relatively simple tasks and move toward more difficult tasks. (If you are not doing a source-based research project, consider other learning steps: what will you need to reread? what kinds of data mapping can you do? whom could you interview, what could you practice on your own, or how could you categorize or organize information?)

**Identify your writing goals:** Focus on generation of material and/or organization or planning. Remember that you can lower the stress level by assigning yourself a rant or a freewrite that is designed as a write-to-learn exercise, or focus on a more productive schedule by assigning yourself pieces of your project such as an introductory paragraph or the start of an argument section. Most often you’ll want to spend 20-30 minutes on an early writing task, though you could spend more if you find that worthwhile.

**Keep an open mind:** Since you learn as you research and write, by your third date you may find yourself revising your timeline; that’s a good sign rather than an indication that this exercise failed you as a writer.

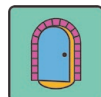
### *Reflect to learn and connect*

When you’re finished, write a “success prediction”: What step that you listed seems most within your grasp and motivation? What about that step makes it seem accessible? Also write a “challenge prediction”: what step that you listed seems most difficult or frustrating? What additional help, resources, or motivation can you locate that would alleviate some of the stress around it?

### *Explore related exercises*

Evidence Garden, Seven Generations, Ten Directed Revisions

## 29.6 Problem Solver Parallels



### Define your goal

Use this exercise to draw on your prior experience in other fields to better understand how a writing problem solving process works. This exercise can help build your **confidence** and **motivation**.

### Take action

**Find your confidence:** List 3-4 areas in which you are already pretty good at solving problems. These can be academic areas such as math or history; artistic or athletic areas such as trumpet performance or lacrosse defense; or work or personal areas such as child care, office management, cooking, home repair, online gaming, or relationships.

Choose one of those areas, and in a few sentences describe a specific problem: either choose one you ran into recently, or describe a kind of problem that you are likely to run into pretty frequently. Your problem should be complicated and “ill-structured”—that is, it should be the kind of “messy” problem that doesn’t have a clear, immediate answer. Choose a story problem rather than a single equation, a game situation rather than a single play, an evening’s menu rather than a single dish.

**Identify your strategies:** Write 1-2 sentences to explain your thinking and/or actions at each step of the six-part problem-solving process:

- **Identify the problem:** What do you look for to help you decide what kind of problem you face, what the key factors of it are, and what the most difficult parts will be? What are some of the most common elements or challenges in a problem like this?
- **Evaluate your resources:** When you encounter this type of problem, what are your main personal and/or professional strengths for solving it? What kind of outside resources, additional help, or new skills do you sometimes need to acquire?
- **Develop a plan:** You probably don’t always write up a four-step plan for solving an everyday problem, but you may have routines or guidelines that you often follow, or strategies that you typically use to help you out. What guides you as you prepare to Take action? What do you try to keep in mind?
- **Apply the strategies:** When you are in the middle of solving the problem, playing the game, performing the piece, or completing the project, what is happening? Do you stop and start a lot, or go with the flow? Do you work solo, or consult others? Is your motivation consistent, or does it rise and fall?

- **Assess your progress:** As you move toward the endpoint of your game, performance, or project, how do you know whether it is going well? Do you judge based on your own perceptions, or get feedback from other people? Do you adapt your approach as you go along, or stick with your original plan until the end?
- **Review and prepare:** You probably don't keep a journal about all your problem solving, but perhaps you take a minute or two to sigh in relief, joy, or frustration at the end of your work on a problem. When you do, what are you most likely thinking? When you have successfully completed a performance or task, how does that make you think about the next upcoming task? When you have been less successful, do you try to “learn a lesson” to make future performances go more smoothly?

### Reflect to learn and connect

When you've finished these descriptions, take a few minutes to consider how your actions related to this kind of problem solving connect to how you are used to working on your writing, and write yourself a few notes. Which sentence that you wrote sounds most similar to an approach or attitude you have about writing? Which sentence sounds least similar? And which sentence sounds most like the way you *wish* you felt about working on your writing?

### Explore related exercises

Authority/Curiosity/Annoyance List, Remix/Mashup, Ten Ways to Choose a Topic

## 29.7 Remix/Mashup



### Define your goal

Use this exercise to create a new problem-solving strategy or writing process by mixing a previously successful writing approach with a newly learned approach.

### Background

You are already an experienced writing-problem solver who uses a range of skills and strategies successfully as you communicate with others, whether you are working on a school essay or posting online. Your goal when you learn a new strategy or approach is to integrate the best of the new knowledge with the best of the old knowledge—not add one on top of the other, or replace one with the other, but *remix* the two to create a new working theory that makes sense *to you* about how to solve writing problems. Drawing on past successes can help improve your **openness** and **confidence** as well as your **persistence**.

*Take action*

**Look back:** Begin by writing a few sentences or a short paragraph about strategies you were taught before this class, or ones that you have been using in completing writing tasks outside class. Even if your strategy was “just stare at the screen until something came to me” or “wait until the deadline for inspiration about a topic” or “scribble an outline on scratch paper,” write about that approach: that is what has been working for you up until now. Try to give some detail about this approach: what are the pieces or steps of it? how long have you been writing this way? where do you think you learned it? what did it feel like when it worked well? what have been the main achievements and drawbacks to it?

**Check the present:** Write a few more sentences about what you’ve recently been learning about solving writing problems: what new strategies for solving knowledge, process, rhetoric, or disposition problems seem most helpful to you? What new terms or concepts have caught your attention? What sorts of writing problems do you think you’ll encounter where these strategies might be most useful? Why do you think they might work, and what doubts do you have about trying them out?

**Plan your strategy remix:** Create a remix or mashup of the two approaches: you can write a paragraph, or use a list or two-column log, to explain when and where you will use strategies from the old and new approaches—or combine them for a third, completely original problem solving style. Consider which approaches might be useful early or late in a writing project, which might be useful for a simple/familiar or a difficult/unfamiliar writing task, and which might be useful with different genres or audiences for writing. Are there any steps, new or old, that you will leave out because they don’t fit who you are as a writer right now? Are there any approaches that you still need to invent because of the writing problems you need to solve right now?

*Reflect to learn and connect*

When you’re done, take a few minutes to apply what you’ve learned: how could you use this new remixed approach today, with a writing project (for school or in your life) that you are working on now?

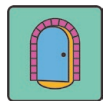
*Explore related exercises*

Genre Switch, Learn-Write Timeline, Letter to Kermit

## 29.8 Values Freewrite

*Define your goal*

Use this exercise to increase your positive attitude and confidence about completing your writing project by connecting to your core beliefs and values.



### Background

Research has shown that your **self-confidence** and **persistence** in the face of difficulty are strongly linked to your personal set of values and life priorities, and that even a simple act of writing to remind yourself about your values can change both your attitude and your ability to accomplish key tasks. If you have been spending too much time worrying about how others judge you, then you can benefit from getting in touch with the values that helped you succeed this far.

### Take action

**List your values:** List at least 4-6 characteristics, behaviors, or beliefs that you personally value most: you might consider qualities such as creativity, relationships with family and friends, independence, learning and gaining knowledge, athletic ability, loyalty to a social group, career accomplishments, spiritual or religious values, perseverance, or sense of humor. The characteristics you choose don't need to have anything to do with your current project, with writing generally, or even with school or learning.

**Explain your values:** Choose two or three of the characteristics or beliefs you just listed, and take a paragraph or two to explain why and how each one has been important to you. You might describe events or situations in which you learned about or practiced these values, or people who helped you realize them. Try to focus on your specific connection to these qualities: what do they mean to you, and how have they affected your own life?

Remember that this is informal freewriting: you don't need to worry about spelling, word choice, or sentence structure. As you conclude, you might want to think and write about your current intentions regarding these particular values: how important are they going to be to you in the coming weeks and months, and how could you be taking steps to continue to live according to these principles?

### Reflect to learn and connect

When you have finished writing, underline the two or three most important phrases or sentences you wrote, the ones you want to remember going forward.

### Explore related exercises

Best and Better, Learn-Write Timeline, Off on a Rant

## 29.9 Write the Problem

### Define your goal

Use this exercise to use a write-to-learn approach to help diagnose and either solve or detour around a writing problem.



### Background

If you're stuck writing and you want to move forward but you don't know how, sometimes it helps simply to freewrite *about* the situation of being stuck. At the very least, you're writing rather than staring at the screen (or eating your way through the stale food in your refrigerator). More likely, though, your capacity for learning as you write will allow you to gain perspective and come up with a new direction to take when you're done. Remember the freewriting rules: write quickly, don't worry about correctness or precision, and keep writing, even if you have to write "I don't know what else to write" several times until your brain feeds you a more interesting idea. Exploring what makes you feel stuck can help with your **motivation** (because a problem with a name can feel easier to solve) as well as your **openness** (because you might discover a whole new challenge or a whole new solution).

### Take action

**Write why you're stuck:** You can simply freewrite for your full 15-20 minutes (set a timer) beginning with the sentence, "I'm having the most trouble writing this \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_" and see where that takes you. Try to give specific examples: what exact approaches or concerns are you struggling with most?

If it's helpful, you can explore one of the approaches below. Try to write at least three or four sentences about each starting point, giving some examples, before you move on, to give your brain time to develop some interesting thinking about it.

- "I was doing ok writing the \_\_\_\_ but I got stuck on \_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_."
- "This would be a lot easier to write if \_\_\_\_\_. For instance, \_\_\_\_\_."
- "I can usually write \_\_\_\_\_ but this seems hard because \_\_\_\_\_. I mean, \_\_\_\_\_."
- "If I had to guess, I'd say this was mostly a rhetoric/knowledge/process/disposition problem because \_\_\_\_\_. For instance, \_\_\_\_\_."
- "This problem feels a little like a problem I had once in writing \_\_\_\_\_. That time, I ended up \_\_\_\_\_."

### Reflect to learn and connect

Finally, when your time is up, write yourself a note: Did you come up with a strategy you could try to work on at this point of your project? Should you skip to a different part of the project that you think you could be more successful at? Or is it truly time to move on to another kind of work and come back to this project at a later time, perhaps after you've asked for help from a peer, tutor, instructor, or supervisor?

### Explore related exercises

Best and Better, Emperor for a Day, Ten Directed Revisions