

# The Freedom Writers: Breaking Educational and Societal Barriers for a Better Future

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Process Paper: 499 words

## Process Paper

Breaking Barriers is such a perfect theme. I had trouble picking a topic because history is full of broken barriers; the theme could fit so well with any topic. I wanted a perfect topic to fully take advantage of the opportunity presented by the theme. When searching for a topic this year, I remembered a film about the Freedom Writers, a group of Los Angeles high schoolers who with the crucial help of their English teacher, Erin Gruwell, defied all odds against them by proving that they weren't unteachable gangsters and could make it to graduation. I remembered the students that despite facing barriers such as sexual and domestic abuse, homelessness, and gang violence their entire lives, still managed to turn their lives into those of success and tolerance. I was inspired by their struggles and their courage. The Freedom Writers broke barriers set by both their educational system and racist society by proving that they as "at-risk," "unteachable" teens had the capacity to care for their education and future and change their lives for the better.

Researching was difficult. While I easily found primary sources due to the recentness of the topic, but it was difficult to come by secondary sources that didn't repeat what I'd already learned. The most detailed information came from reading *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*, a book made of the compiled journals the Freedom Writers were assigned to write in throughout their high school career, and Erin Gruwell's *Teach with Your Heart: Lessons I Learned from the Freedom Writers: A*

*Memoir*. These two books were crucial in my research because they chronicled every detail of Gruwell and her students' story.

I love to find a compelling topic that makes a compelling story. I love making it come to life through performance so that my audience truly understands the emotions of the people involved. I felt that by choosing performance I could adequately portray and do justice to the struggles of the Freedom Writers. I chose to play Erin Gruwell because she was the reason these students realized that they had the capability to change, and she gives the audience the perspective that in order to help her students break barriers, she had to break countless of her own. I chose to play Maria Reyes to represent the perspective of the students because I know it is crucial to show why they felt and acted so negatively. Maria is a real Freedom Writer, and I chose to play her because I could relate to her as a Latinx teenager.

Both Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers faced many different barriers, like traumatic pasts, educators who had given up on and opposed them, and a racist community, to name a few. But with much endeavor, Gruwell helped the Writers care for their education. Together, they overcame the barriers they had faced their entire lives to become successful members of society.

## Annotated Bibliography

### Primary Sources

Chung, Connie, et al. "Freedom Writers Primetime Live Interview." *Primetime Live*, season 7, episode 15, ABC News, 15 Apr. 1998.

This ABC Primetime Live episode was one of the ways the Freedom had become known nationally for the first time. It was extremely useful because it had interviews with the Freedom Writers while they were still in high school.

The Freedom Writers, and Erin Gruwell. *The Freedom Writers Diary: How a Teacher and 150 Teens Used Writing to Change Themselves and the World Around Them*. Broadway Books/New York, 1999.

This book is a compilation of the diaries the Freedom Writers and Erin Gruwell kept throughout their time together in high school. This book was used for inspiring much of my script, especially in portraying the perspective of the Freedom Writers. It really helped me understand their troubled lives and how that impacted the way they viewed Gruwell, school, and the world. Much of my research came from this book. It also contained newspaper headlines, which helped me find more sources.

"Freedom Writers Foundation; Freedom Writer Teachers to Write Follow-Up to New York Times' Best Seller the Freedom Writers Diary." *Science Letter*, 29 Jul 2008, pp. 3339. *elibrary*, <https://explore.proquest.com/elibrary/document/209059169?accountid=2868>.

This newspaper article details how the Freedom Writers Foundation was to hold the 2008 Freedom Writer Teachers Workshop. The Foundation has a teacher-training program to help teachers across the country and Canada to use Gruwell's strategies to help their own classrooms. It gave me insight on how Erin Gruwell and the Freedom Writers have continued to make change long after their time together in the classroom.

Gruwell, Erin. *Teach with Your Heart: Lessons I Learned from The Freedom Writers*. Broadway Books, 2007.

This book was the most detailed source in my research because it gave me all the barriers Erin encountered from her first day of class all the way to where the Freedom Writers are now as adults. I would say that this was my best source because she helped me understand and relive her and her students' struggles. Much of my script was inspired by quotes in this book. It especially helped me portray Erin Gruwell and her endeavors in dealing with her troubled students.

Hahn, Don and Lori Korngiebel, directors. *Freedom Writers: Stories from the Heart*. PBS, Public Broadcasting Service, 2 Sept. 2019, [www.pbs.org/video/freedom-writers-stories-from-the-heart-jkr5ap/](http://www.pbs.org/video/freedom-writers-stories-from-the-heart-jkr5ap/).

This PBS special followed the journey of Erin Gruwell and her students and had many different Freedom Writers tell their stories as adults. I used it to comprehend where many of them came from emotionally and to see just how much they'd changed. Part of my script was inspired by Maria describing how reading *The Diary of Anne Frank* changed her.

Haynes, V. Dion. "CATHARTIC WRITING COURSE CHRONICLES STUDENTS' PAIN." *Chicagotribune.com*, 29 Aug. 2018, [www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1998-02-10-9802100266-story.html](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1998-02-10-9802100266-story.html).

This newspaper was one of many newspapers released with updates of the Freedom Writers, and this one described how Gruwell assigned diaries to her students where they wrote about their pain, both past, present, and the future.

LEAD, director. *This Teacher Taught The Impossible. This Teacher Taught The Impossible | Erin Gruwell @ LEAD Presented By HR.com*, 8 Apr. 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4mF7CP3rSM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=h4mF7CP3rSM).

This video was of a speech Erin Gruwell gave about her story to the LEAD Conference. Her words inspired my script when she spoke of her "Toast for Change" and how it truly changed their lives.

Meindersma, Sandy. "Freedom Writer: Woman Shows How At-Risk Kids Can Succeed." *Telegram & Gazette*, Nov 22, 2009. ProQuest, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/269044524?accountid=2868>.

This newspaper recorded the contents of a speech Maria Reyes gave at the Boy's and Girl's Club Northeast Region Keystone conference in 2009. This source helped me understand the negativity she had before meeting Erin Gruwell. I learned about her past; I learned how she was jumped into a gang, how education had never been the priority in her family, and how she would be on probation when she joined Gruwell's class.

PBS, Houston, director. *Maria REYES on InnerVIEWS with Ernie Manouse*, 25 Mar. 2015, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=797\\_cGr4pwE](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=797_cGr4pwE).

This video was an interview with Maria Reyes. It was very useful to learn about her speech and behavioral mannerisms. It was also very useful because it really went into her personal experience with the intolerance of Long Beach. I related to her struggles as a Mexican American facing intolerance.

Reem, Craig. "The Hottest 25 People in Orange County: Erin Gruwell." *OC Metro*, 1997, pp. 30.  
*ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/219625360?accountid=2868>.

This newspaper described how Erin Gruwell and her newly graduated students were raising money to visit Anne Frank's home and Auschwitz and to pay for their college tuition.

"Southeast; Students Bring Teenager Who Wrote about Sarajevo to L.A.: [Home Edition]." *Los Angeles Times (pre-1997 Fulltext)*, Mar 19, 1996, pp. 4.  
*ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/293207433?accountid=2868>.

This newspaper announced how the Freedom Writers had raised enough money for Zlata Filipovic, a Bosnian diarist hailed as the "modern-day Anne Frank," to visit Long Beach and meet them.

Talks, Tedx, director. *TEDxConejo - Erin Gruwell - The Freedom Writers. TEDxConejo - Erin Gruwell - The Freedom Writers*, 15 May 2011, [www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDq9o9j3-CU](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nDq9o9j3-CU).

This video was of Erin Gruwell speaking at TEDxConejo. Her words greatly inspired specific parts of my script. In her speech she showed part of a

documentary the Freedom Writers made where Maria Reyes described her story. I used this to learn how to use Maria's dialect and show her emotions.

Trierweiler, Hannah. "Talking with ERIN GRUWELL." *Instructor* (1999), vol. 118, no. 4, 2009, pp. 27-28.  
*ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/224394810?accountid=2868>.

This article contained an interview with Erin Gruwell discussing how their foundation has helped so many teachers that are struggling through similar things she did and why they aren't being helped financially.

Wride, Nancy. "She Opened their Eyes and they Opened Up their Lives; Education: Erin Gruwell used the Holocaust to Teach Students about Tolerance. Then they Filled a Book about Horrors of their Own.: [Home Edition]." *Los Angeles Times*, Nov 14, 1997, pp. 1-E, 1:3.  
*ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/421254700?accountid=2868>.

This newspaper was written by Nancy Wride, a writer that worked closely with the Freedom Writers in taking the very first steps in making their story known locally. She was mentioned often in Gruwell's *Teach With Your Heart*, so I tried to find as many of her articles as I could.

Wride, Nancy. "Truth Stronger than Friction; Troubled Teens Find Hope Amid Holocaust: [Orange County Edition]." *Los Angeles Times*, Oct 12, 1997, pp. 1.  
*ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/421227564?accountid=2868>.

This newspaper article mentioned various of Gruwell's teaching methods as well as people who helped her along the way, such as her superintendent Dr. Carl Cohn, who supported her when her colleagues didn't, and John Tu, a co-founder of a technology company who sponsored much of their field trips and other expenses.

Wride, Nancy. "Civil Writers; Teacher, Student Authors Pitch Tolerance, Book in N.Y.: [Orange County Edition]." *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 16, 1998, pp. 1.  
*ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/421396886?accountid=2868>.

This newspaper article is a summary of a field trip the Freedom Writers took to New York City to receive the Spirit of Anne Frank Award for their efforts to

promote tolerance, as well as to work with Doubleday, the publishing house that published Anne Frank's diary, to publish *The Freedom Writers Diary*.

## Secondary Sources

Choi, Jung-Ah. "Reading Educational Philosophies in Freedom Writers." *The Clearing House*, vol. 82, no. 5, 2009, pp. 244-248. *elibrary*, <https://explore.proquest.com/elibrary/document/196884218?accountid=2868>.

This scholarly journal article discusses the educational theories that are the foundation of Gruwell's pedagogy. It recognized these theories as creating a family within the classroom, viewing students as inventors of knowledge rather than receivers, self-realization, and creating her own curriculum as opposed to the standards. This article helped me understand what is at the core of the Freedom Writers' story and what makes their success unique.

"Freedom Writers" Founder Motivates the Marginalized." *Reading Today*, vol. 22, no. 6, 2005, pp. 13. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/223425489?accountid=2868>.

This newspaper was about the speech Gruwell gave at the 50<sup>th</sup> Annual Convention of the International Reading Association. It gave me ideas on how to end my performance because she ends her speech by "passing the baton" to her audience to help students in need.

"How California Teacher Erin Gruwell Inspired a Generation of Writers." *PBS SoCal*, 29 Mar. 2019, [www.pbssocal.org/uncategorized/california-teacher-erin-gruwell-inspired-generation-writers/](http://www.pbssocal.org/uncategorized/california-teacher-erin-gruwell-inspired-generation-writers/).

This article is a summary of the story of the Freedom Writers. It includes a Q and A with Gruwell about their recent documentary.

LaGravenese, Richard, director. *Freedom Writers*. Paramount Home Entertainment, 2007.

This was a movie made about the Freedom Writers that really brought their story to fame. This movie was how I found out about the Freedom Writers in the first place, but I made sure to avoid basing my script on the film. I did not want to make a project over the movie because it is in the nature of films to oversimplify and dramatize. Of course, a performance must do a little of this too, but I wanted to create my project based on *The Freedom Writers Diary* and more reliable sources because after all, this book was how their story became known in the first place. I referenced this movie only to learn the characterization and mannerisms of my characters, such as behavior and dialect.

McLellan, Dennis. "ORANGE COUNTY CALENDAR; on Road to Unity with Freedom Writers; A Teacher's Modest Effort to Give Teens a Lesson in Tolerance Blossoms into Life-Changing Experience for them and those they Inspire.: [Orange County Edition]." *Los Angeles Times*, Feb 13, 2000, pp. B-11. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/421502998?accountid=2868>.

This newspaper article summarized the story of the Freedom Writers, from Freshman year to post-graduation. It also documented how they were going across the country in a busy schedule for their book tour, interviews, and TV guest shots.

Piccalo, Gina. "Did 'Writers' Get it Wrong?; the Portrayal of a Long Beach High School in 'Freedom Writers' Raises Hackles in the City. the Teacher Who Inspired the Film Speaks Up for it.: [HOME EDITION]." *Los Angeles Times*, Jan 09, 2007. *ProQuest*, <https://search.proquest.com/docview/422123821?accountid=2868>.

This newspaper documented some of the criticism the Freedom Writers movie got after it was released because some of the locals were upset with the negative light their city and schools were portrayed in. Gruwell and the director of the movie stood by the film because they stressed that the movie took place about a decade earlier, and that much of the negative portrayals were accurate to the time period and played a major role in the lives of her students.

Reis, Jacqueline. "Voices of Writers Inspire Students." *Telegram & Gazette*, 07 Nov 2008. *elibrary*, <https://explore.proquest.com/elibrary/document/269026943?accountid=2868>.

This article was a summary of a speech Erin Gruwell gave to a city's Jewish community and high school students that retold her and her students' story. At the end of the article there were some quotes from the high school audience's

optimistic impression. That was helpful in understanding how students gain hope in their teachers after hearing Gruwell's story and how they, like the Freedom Writers, were amazed to find that there were teachers who cared about them.

Writers, Freedom, and Erin Gruwell. "Freedom Writers Foundation." *Freedom Writers Foundation*, 2016, [www.freedomwritersfoundation.org/](http://www.freedomwritersfoundation.org/).

The Freedom Writers created this nonprofit foundation that funds scholarships and promotes innovative teaching. I used their website to contact them to try and set up an interview with Maria Reyes, but I did not receive a response.