



# A BEGINNER'S GUIDE TO FREEFORMS

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The roleplaying games of today have diversified from their wargaming based origins resulting in games that place less emphasis on the wargaming essentials of complex rules and copious dice rolling, (although some gamers maintain that this is still the best part).

Some players are more interested in character development, settings and the roleplaying aspect of the games. This has led to the development of freeforms and systemless gaming.



Freeforms are a type of roleplaying game that has little to do with rulebooks and dice and more to do with the dramatic element of roleplaying. They involve a large group of players who all act out a scenario together. Players are assigned a character and they interact with each other in character. The effect is that all players are simultaneously roleplaying, while the game moderator ensures the game flows smoothly. There is no need for the GM to facilitate conversations between characters as the players are all speaking directly to each other, and there are usually no non-player characters for the GM to control.



Probably the best way to get to understand how freeforms work is to play in one. They are often run at gaming conventions or as separate events because of their size and the time taken to write them. However, if you want to write a freeform yourself and find out about them that way, (the hard way), here are some guidelines and suggestions that may be of assistance.

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## **Writing Freeforms**

### **Themes**

The first step is to choose a theme or genre and from this should come the setting. The options are as unlimited as any other roleplaying scenario. Some examples of diverse settings and themes that have been used successfully in freeforms have included: politics over a disputed heir to a noble family (which could obviously be used in any historic period); celebrity auditions for a Broadway production; school rivalries at the end of year prom; and a wake following a family member's funeral set in an isolated Gothic house.



Freeforms can quite successfully be taken from books or films that give you a wealth of characters. This could give players a unique opportunity to play a familiar character from a well-known story. *Robin Hood*, *Alice in Wonderland* and *Inspector Gadget* have all been converted to freeforms and run at Australian conventions. The obvious plotlines from the stories, that would probably be familiar to many of the players, should be avoided. The freeform should concentrate more on a sequel to the characters' adventures, rather than re-hashing old plots.

Role-playing systems with detailed world backgrounds, such as *Vampire*, *Traveller* and *Shadowrun* are easy to convert to freeforms, with many ideas for settings already detailed in the rulebooks.

An interesting addition to a long term campaign is for gamemasters to run freeforms as one-off scenarios as part of their campaign. It involves a fair bit of extra work on the GM's part but can be well worth the enjoyment

players could get out of running their campaign characters in the freeform - friends can be enlisted to play the parts of the regular NPCs if needed.

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## Size

Once the setting and themes have been chosen the next step is to decide on the size of the freeform. A small controllable number is best if you are just starting out or if you want to run one as part of your campaign. Between nine and fifteen players works well for small freeforms. Freeforms that have been written to be run at a party or a role-playing convention are usually around twenty to thirty players, although *Egypt Divided*, written by Robert Prior and run at Sydcon '92 managed to fascinate over a hundred players for nine hours. Don't try this at home kids - start small.

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## Characters

Within any freeform all characters will usually fall into groups that may be derived from their social standing, their political affiliations, membership of organisation or religious groups. An example of this could be the noble court where you may have the noble family currently in power, other nobles at court, servants, visiting dignitaries, entertainers and a secret group of usurpers, who may be drawn from any of the other groups. Ideas for characters should begin to develop according to their "type" and with them their goals. For example the noble family will want to keep power, the usurpers want to overthrow them, the visiting dignitaries may have secret agendas and one of the entertainers may be the true prince in disguise. This is where the need for certain characters will become obvious and characters should begin to be assigned names and personalities.

Of course, it may not work this way and you might start out with a small group of interesting characters and have to build the settings and plots around them (such as when the freeform occurs within a campaign). Characters and plots will grow the more you write and you will begin to develop a network of interlinking plots and character knowledge and background. Cross referencing the information given in character sheets is very important. All characters will have some knowledge of all other characters, but where two or more characters have a special relationship or

know of another characters secret, it is vital that the appropriate information is included on the characters sheet.

For example, Sir Sarrion and the unhappily married Lady Coquette have been engaged in a more-than-courtly- love affair for six months and, as Lady Coquette's character sheet points out, this has been kept a secret from her jealous husband, Lord Anusol. Unfortunately Sir Sarrion's sheet fails to mention Coquette at all or, worse, neglects to point out that she is married and the affair is secret. This could lead to all sorts of disastrous consequences, most especially player confusion.

Also remember not to let plotlines and character backgrounds get too carried away. If you're not careful your carefully nurtured freeform may take on a life of its own and threaten to explode into something completely unmanageable. Try and keep the size you want in the back of your mind at all times.

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## Plots

There is usually a major plot that is fairly obvious to everyone (eg the death of a family member in suspicious circumstances that has led to the family gathering for the wake). There also have to be sub-plots and the more characters there are the more sub-plots they'll need to keep them busy. This may seem obvious, but plots should only be written on the character sheets of those who are directly involved in them or aware of their existence. Others may find out about them as the freeform progresses by interacting with the characters involved. Don't be tempted to tell everyone everything - let them work for it. Rumour, confusions and outright lies can also get different characters involved, one way or another, in a plot.

It is vital to keep a comprehensive file of all plots and who is involved in them for gamemaster reference. At the end of the freeform it is probably an idea to have a "debriefing", where the designer reveals all the plots and often invites players to explain what they were up to. This is a the chance for the players to find out what everyone else was doing and explains any unresolved plots that they may be curious about. Allow sufficient time for this, as it may get quite complicated.

## Props and Stage Design

Important items which players need to have can be represented either by a tangible prop (eg a plastic sword, a piece of costume jewellery, a will or other document) or by a card with the object described on it. The card system is more practical where the item is something like a pet poodle impaled by a pair of gardening shears, which may be a little tricky (not to mention illegal) to actually acquire. Money can also be represented by cards or by Monopoly money.

If the designers are keen then props such as a will can be written up in legalese to be read at the appropriate time. Business cards appropriate for a character may be made up. Perhaps a plot has been revealed in the pages of a tabloid newspaper which can be put together and copies distributed around the freeform area. As setting the mood is important for freeforms, a good designer will cast a critical eye over the "stage" for a freeform and think of how it can be dressed up to look appropriate. Wall hangings, mood lighting and appropriate music all assist in suspending players' disbelief.

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## Gamemasters

As a general rule, freeforms need about 1 gamemaster for every 10 people playing - either rope in friends or, if the freeform is written by a group (which is a really good idea as freeforms can be a LOT of work), all of the writers can help gamemaster. If it has been decided to write as a group, different people can be responsible for writing different sections or characters BUT collaboration on plots and information must occur. Otherwise characters could be misled and confused if their information conflicts or leads nowhere.



Gamemasters spend most of their time arbitrating on conflicts between characters and responding to questions from players concerning the boundaries of the freeform (what actions are allowable in the game, whether or not actions can be taken outside of the freeform area and other such queries) The GMs should also be pushing the action along,

announcing any main events that may occur in the freeform - "OK kids, the prom starts now".

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## ***Playing Freeforms***

All players are given a character description, which usually includes a personality, history and goals. They are also generally given some knowledge of all the other characters. It is a good idea if players get their character sheet in advance, so they have a bit of time to prepare their costume. This also allows people to become familiar with their background and plot complexities - reading character sheets ten minutes before play often means people will forget details that could be important.



With this information they are let loose upon each other, and the fun commences. The scenario is usually played out in a large area and hopefully with costuming, if the players are into the spirit of things.

Remembering a large number of character names can be alleviated by providing name tags for all the players.

The characters then interact with all the others and this may take some time, especially with a large number of people, as characters struggle to find information and allies to help them with their goals. This is done at a personal level, between characters, with major conflicts being dealt with by a gamemaster. Of course, characters often have conflicting goals and politics, so deceit and bargaining play a large part in the game flow.

So after all this does it still sound confusing? Freeforms can be described as plays without a script but with plots, characters, costumes and props. Or they can be barely organised chaos, but at least everyone has a good time....and that's the most important thing.

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## ***An Example***

Two people decide they would like to write a freeform with a pirate theme set somewhere in the Caribbean in the 1600's. Obvious groups for this would be the pirates; their opposition, the Navy and the rulers of the island who could be secretly allied to the pirates but pretending to co-operate with the imposed foreign law. Perhaps the original inhabitants of the island could be involved by being leaders of rebel groups and set up as servants to spy on affairs. The writers then decide there will be about twenty characters as they want to run this at a party and think that would be a good excuse for the characters to get together too - the setting will be a party at the Governor's mansion to celebrate the new allegiance between the island and the naval forces who now want to use it as a base.

Now they start to think up names and goals - obviously there is the Governor and his family, the naval admiral and his underlings and Saucy Pierre the pirate leader, who is in disguise trying to find out the plans of the Navy. Unknown to them all, the head servant at the mansion is Elmon the leader of a Voodoo coven who wants to gain power by putting a curse on the Governor.

They then decide to work on the individual characters - one person takes the Governor and the Navy, as they are allied groups. The other person takes the Voodoo coven and pirates. They both discuss the plots and interconnecting character secrets while they individually have the task of creating quirks and descriptions to flesh out the characters. They also write a short introductory paragraph explaining the character history and goals and descriptions of any other characters that are important to them (if they are really keen they could give a short descriptive paragraph of general knowledge about all the other characters). Saucy Pierre the pirate leader, for example, was the illegitimate son of the Governor and was raised by Mother Hopi, the local wise woman - he is determined to gain wealth so he can woo Sian, the daughter of a wealthy local merchant - but he must move soon as he has heard that the Governor intends his son to propose to Sian - maybe at the party!

Once all the characters have been completed and the plots checked, the characters are sent out to the players about a week before the freeform scheduled. The player who is playing Saucy Pierre decides he will base his costume on one he has seen in an old Errol Flynn movie - very dashing.

When all the characters are gathered together on the night, the two gamemasters explain the scenario in a bit more detail and let the players start to interact while they also partake of the munchies. The gamemasters have also set the scene by decorating the house with candelabras and nautical flags.

