

WRITING FOR WELL-BEING



By Anne M. Brafford | April 2022

Expressive writing, reflective writing, journaling, and freewriting [1] all describe writing practices that can help us sort out our experience and organize and verbalize our thoughts. If a writing practice isn't already part of your well-being toolkit, you might consider giving it a try. Much research has found that it can result in many positive outcomes and improvements to your quality of life—including positive effects on mental health and personal and professional development.

Writing For Mental Health & Happiness

Reflecting on our experience and writing down our thoughts can impact us in many ways. It can, for example, make us more self-aware, help us work out difficult emotions, aid our detection of unhealthy patterns in our thoughts and behaviors, enable us to clarify our goals and values to take greater control over our lives, put things in perspective, and shift our mindsets (Ackerman, 2022; Newman, 2016, 2020).

>> *Well-Being Benefits of Expressive Writing*

Through pathways like these, expressive writing can promote well-being by, for example:

- Boosting mood/affect,
- Enhancing our sense of well-being,
- Reducing symptoms of depression and anxiety,
- Reducing intrusion and avoidance symptoms post-trauma,
- Improving working memory, and
- Boosting our immune system (Ackerman, 2022; Newman, 2016, 2020).

>> *Expressive Writing Example Exercise*

The Greater Good Science Center (a nonprofit at University of California-Berkeley) provides a [free worksheet](#) for engaging in an expressive writing exercise specifically to work through an emotional challenge. It provides the following directions:

“Over the next four days, write down your deepest emotions and thoughts about an emotional challenge that has been affecting your life. In your writing, really let go and explore the event and how it has affected you. You might tie this experience to your childhood, your relationship with your parents, people you have loved or love now, or even your career. Write continuously for 20 minutes.

Tips for writing:

- Find a time and place where you won't be disturbed.
- Write continuously for at least 20 minutes.
- Don't worry about spelling or grammar.
- Write only for yourself.
- Write about something extremely personal and important to you.
- Deal only with events or situations you can handle now—that is, don't write about a trauma too soon after it has happened if it feels too overwhelming.
- Optional final step: After the four days of writing, try writing from the perspectives of other people involved in the event or situation.”

As this exercise reflects, the traditional advice is to write for 20 minutes for four days in a row

(Newman, 2016). But research suggests that writing for even a few minutes can be beneficial. In their book [Opening Up by Writing it Down](#), James Pennebaker (a chief researcher of the well-being benefits of expressive writing) and Joshua Smyth recommend trying at least two sessions. They suggest waiting at least 10 minutes in between writing sessions because that break allows your brain to process and integrate (Newman, 2016).

Reflective Writing to Foster Gratitude & Forgiveness

Gratitude journaling is a form of reflective writing in which you focus specifically on aspects of your life for which you're grateful (Ackerman, 2022). Higher levels of gratitude are linked to, for example, better quality of sleep, greater optimism, progress on goals, and fewer symptoms of depression.

Greater Good Magazine provides a free [worksheet](#) to try out the popular "Three Good Things Exercise" and an article that gives [Tips for Keeping a Gratitude Journal](#).

Similarly, reflecting in writing on the silver-lining or benefits that have arisen from hurtful experiences can facilitate forgiveness for those who have hurt you (McCullough et al., 2006).

Writing For Learning, Development, & Leader Development

"We do not learn from experience...we learn reflecting on experience" John Dewey.

Reflective or expressive writing often is used in educational and professional development settings to aid self-awareness and integration of learning.

For example, through self-debriefing and other reflective practices, people reflect on a specific interaction or performance opportunity and identify their own strengths and weaknesses (Boet et al., 2011). The ability to effectively engage in such self-assessment is critical to self-

regulation and lifelong learning, which is essential to the maintenance of professional competence (Boet et al., 2011). Professionals should be encouraged to engage in ongoing "reflection-on-action," in which they continually monitor their ability to deal with the emerging situation.

In particular, leader development will stall without a regular practice of reflection. Without the habit of regularly and consciously considering the events of daily life in light of our long-term aspirations, we will not learn from experience—and we will not develop the skills and competencies needed to achieve our goals (Gardner, 1997). As a result, leader development experts commonly recommend that leaders and aspiring leaders start a reflective writing practice (e.g., Adler, 2016; CCL Staff, 2020; Ciampa et al., 2017; Densten & Gray, 2001).

The [Center for Creative Leadership](#) provides the following guidance for doing so:

"The form and content of your journal is a matter of individual choice. However, when you do sit down to make a journal entry about an experience that has challenged your equilibrium, we recommend it have 3 parts:

1. *The event or experience.* Describe what occurred as objectively as possible. Don't use judgmental language. Stick to the facts. What happened? Who was involved? When did it happen? Where did it happen?
2. *Your reaction.* Describe your reaction to the event as factually and objectively as possible. What did you want to do in response to the event? What did you actually do? What were your thoughts? What were your feelings?
3. *The lessons.* Think about the experience and your reaction to it. What did you learn from the event and from your reaction to it? Did the event suggest a development need you should address? Do you see a pattern in your reactions? Did you react differently than in the past during similar experiences and does that suggest you are making progress or

backsliding on a valuable leadership competency?

In short — capture the event or experience in objective language, describe your reaction, then note the lessons you might get from it. We use journaling as part of almost all our leadership development program experiences, and we emphasize with our participants that learning doesn't come from the 'doing' but in the 'reflecting on the doing.'" (CCL Staff, 2020).

Conclusion

A personal journal could be a beneficial addition to everyone's well-being and professional development toolkit. It's a practice that even busy lawyers can squeeze into their routines. The potential benefits will be well worth the investment.

End Notes

[1] Broadly defined, "freewriting" is simply the technique of writing without stopping or editing (Li, 2007). It refers to writing continuously for a fixed period in which you put down whatever is on your mind without pausing and worrying about specific words or technical issues. The spontaneous nature of freewriting is meant to ease the mental burden that comes with trying to perfect the words used, which can interfere with the flow of expressing one's thoughts. The technique often is taught in writing courses and was popularized by Julia Cameron through her book *The Artist's Way* (1992).

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