

Writing for Wellness and Resilience

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Expressive writing need not be time consuming, intimidating, or an added burden or chore on busy schedules. This is writing as a release valve, self-expression, stress reduction and mindfulness. Below are multiple brief research backed formats and simple prompts to explore. You can use them on your own, or lead your colleagues through an activity at work. Make it easy and fun.

The Pennebaker Protocol (gold standard): Write continuously for 15-20 minutes on 3-5 occasions (traditionally 4 consecutive days) about deepest thoughts and feelings regarding stressful experiences. Don't worry about spelling, grammar, or structure. Write only for yourself—you may destroy the writing afterward. Let go and write freely. This protocol shows benefits persisting for months after just 60-80 total minutes of writing.

Micro-journaling (3-10 minutes): Write the date, create a list of ~10 ideas on any topic, write one thing you're grateful for. This ultra-brief format builds idea generation habits, increases cognitive flexibility, and cultivates gratitude with maximum impact and minimum time.

5-minute anxiety relief: Set a timer and write every worry without stopping or judging. After, note "Can I control this?" beside each worry. If yes, write one small action; if no, write "Let go." This exercise provides relief by externalizing anxious thoughts and identifying actionable items.

5-minute structured journaling: Morning format—What am I grateful for? (3 things), What would make today great? (3 things), Daily affirmation (1-2 positive statements). Evening format—3 amazing things that happened today, What could have made today better? What lessons did I learn? Research shows this brief daily practice improves mental health, self-awareness, decision-making, and cultivates sustainable gratitude mindsets.

90-second to 2-minute practices for the busiest days: Write just the date and one sentence about today. One word about your mood. One thing you're grateful for. Or consider even shorter: **Six-word memoirs:** Example: "Monday morning, coffee first, then courage." Even these short practices creates focus, reduces intimidation, maintain the habit and help frame positive mindset.

Workplace stress writing (20 minutes, 3 times): Studies specifically examining occupational expressive writing found that writing about work-related stressful experiences for 20 minutes on 3 consecutive days or spread over 3 weeks significantly reduced burnout and exhaustion, decreased psychosomatic complaints, improved sleep quality, lowered irritability, and enhanced work-life balance awareness.

Stream of consciousness (5 minutes min or longer): Set a timer, write your first thought, then the next, then the next. Don't stop, judge, or edit. If you run out of thoughts, write "I don't know what to write" These access subconscious thoughts, reduces mental clutter, and require no skill.

Gratitude writing (3-5 minutes): Write 3 good things that happened today. Look around right now and write something you're grateful for. Write about someone who listens when you're anxious. Gratitude writing decreased stress while helping positively reframe stressful events.

Emotional processing prompts (10-15 minutes): Write about a recent situation where you overcame anxiety—how did you feel after? If anxiety were a person, what would you say to them? Creates psychological distance from distressing feelings, reducing emotional reactivity.

Workplace-specific prompts: Write about work-related challenges you're facing and your thoughts and feelings about them. Describe a mistake at work that led to something positive. Define your purpose: "I exist to ____ (desired impact) in order to serve ____ (intended audience)."

Sentence starters for those who freeze at blank pages: "One thing I appreciate is..." "A challenge I'm facing..." "If I could change one thing..." "Right now I'm feeling..."

Write about Delight (5-20 minutes): write about one thing that brought you delight today. Could be a song, person, a gesture, any source big or small, mundane or surprising. Be as specific as possible about the object of delight and how and why it created this feeling in you. Inspired by poet Ross Gay's Book of Delight, in which he made this a daily practice for a year.

Morning Pages (1 hour daily): Every morning before starting your day, write 3 full stream-of-consciousness pages by hand. Write on any subject, for yourself only, not to be shared or reread. Recommended for anyone seeking a more involved practice created. Millions have done this 12 week course created by famed writing instructor Julia Cameron in her book The Artist's Way.

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You do not have to be good.
You do not have to walk on your knees
for a hundred miles through the desert repenting.
You only have to let the soft animal of your body
love what it loves.
Tell me about despair, yours, and I will tell you mine.
Meanwhile the world goes on.
Meanwhile the sun and the clear pebbles of the rain
are moving across the landscapes,
over the prairies and the deep trees,
the mountains and the rivers.
Meanwhile the wild geese, high in the clean blue air,
are heading home again.
Whoever you are, no matter how lonely,
the world offers itself to your imagination,
calls to you like the wild geese, harsh and exciting -
over and over announcing your place
in the family of things.
— Mary Oliver