

*Writing for Well-Being: From My Adolescence to My Adolescent Students*

**An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)**

**by**

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## **Abstract**

Writing has been shown to improve both mental and physical health. The practice of writing is often utilized for therapeutic means in formal and informal settings. Writing can support an overall well-being when implemented in secondary English classrooms to aid adolescents in the process of identity formation and utilize this difficult time to build coping mechanisms. This thesis is rooted in my experience with writing as a source of comfort and understanding during my adolescence. I use my experience and a variety literature on writing for therapeutic or academic purposes to explore how writing for well-being can be implemented into English classrooms. My analysis is separated into five main categories: Writing as a Release, Writing to Understand, Writing in Variety, Writing Routines, and Writing to Share.

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**Process Analysis Statement**

The process of creating this thesis had a few major parts: reading and analyzing the body of writing from my adolescence, researching the benefits of writing and different implementations of writing in the classroom, and of course the combination of these two processes into the written final product. Throughout the following thesis, I will discuss the results of my reflection on my own writing, however the process of this reflection revealed much more. I learned the weight of what we can leave behind. Digging through my old notebooks, journals, and computer files was much like looking back in time. The experience made me consider how my four years at Ball State will leave a similar, yet very different, trail of writing behind. My future classroom and students will create their own trails of writing branching from my own. I will have a large paper and digital footprint in my lifetime and I have come to find this to be a beautiful concept.

During my research, I further saw the largescale trail of writing in our world. The discussion of writing spans many fields of study which I could barely begin to tap into. Even with much written about writing, I realized my self-research sparked questions that I could not find the answers to. I wanted to uncover the power in writing love poems as a teenager and if there are researched benefits to performing spoken word poetry. Through my research, I could not find any answers to some of my particular questions which has led me to discover that while the research I do discuss in my thesis is impactful and important, writing is a very individualistic experience like any form of expression. I felt validated in my adolescent writing experiences from my research, but I also knew that some of the specific benefits I experienced from certain types of writing may not have a research study ready and tied up in bow for me to find. I realized

that that is okay. Self-discovery has its place in some of these questions as it did before I began to analyze why writing helped me and instead simply wrote.

Once I finished with the gathering phase of my thesis and dove primarily into the creating phase, I found that I was drawn to my personal experiences in a way that left me dancing on a line between a research-focused and self-focused thesis. Writing this thesis has helped me find that balance in my writing. I struggled with how much of my experiences and my ideas I wanted and what I wanted to share and appreciate from the research I had completed. I believe you will find the following pages to be an interesting blend of my stories, my poetry, and my suggestion and analysis as supported and integrated with the thoughts of others. I could, of course, continue to wrestle with the distributions of my writing, but in the end, I feel like I said what I needed to say of my experience and shared what I wanted to share from what I discovered.

The most interesting conflict I felt throughout the process of writing this thesis was between my desire to write in my own creative voice and a pull to tighten up to a traditional research paper voice. Despite the encouragement of my advisor, I continued to slip out of my experiences to regurgitate a research paper like so many I have written in my schooling. Ironically, in most of my education, I found that I would accidentally slip the other way. However, I wanted this body of writing to be more of me than the average academic piece of writing.

The challenge to write the way I wanted to while connecting to meaningful research seems representative of my future career as an English teacher. Much like my thesis, in teaching I always begin with what I already know. I must reflect and better understand what I know and what I have done before I can explore the research, theory, and practices of others to strengthen my plan for my classroom. Teaching, to me, is a balance between bringing yourself into the classroom and implementing meaningful content with effective strategies and, of course, the

consideration for the room of students with their own experiences. The process of balance is essential in all teaching and I think you will find balance is important in the exploration and hopefully implementation of writing for well-being.

## Introduction

Words (*January 25, 2016*)

Actions may speak louder than words,  
But my words define me,  
Embody me,  
Are me.  
Somewhere between my first word  
And waking up today,  
I learned to sing without music.  
Ideas tumble out of me  
Like marbles and on good days  
I can catch them mid-roll.  
Have beauty flow out of my pen like sweet nectar.  
When I'm asked: how I thought of that word choice?  
What inspires me?  
Where my poetry hides?  
I have an inclination to mutter  
"Thin air".  
My best poems aren't written,  
They are exploded or flooded.  
Word vomit on paper that's meant only to be spoken.  
It's a strike of passion.  
A bolt of lightning.  
Electricity stings in my fingers  
Until I let the sparks fly.

I used to cry every time I wrote a poem.  
I was releasing some part of me to the paper.  
Tears were a checkpoint to completion  
And sometimes I worry without them  
My words never land on the page the same.  
I sit waiting for inspiration.  
Unable to write without a burst of poetic fluency.  
Maybe my writing is nothing but miracles—  
A lucky one hit wonder on repeat.  
I can't be understood until I am heard,  
Yet, I'm afraid this demon inside me  
Banging to be written down  
Will one day be the only words spoken.

I wrote the poem, "Words," when I was an eighteen-year-old senior in high school. I was a few short months away from leaving high school behind. I had endured a fairly typical

adolescence filled with moments which felt life-shattering. Whenever emotions, whether founded in real concern or pure teenage drama, swelled inside me I wrote them down. Poetry exploded from me as I left everything I had on the page. It was the kind of angst-fueled writing that came so naturally that I couldn't explain how it happened any more than I could stop it from coming.

I couldn't tell you the first time I found enjoyment or catharsis in writing, but I still stumble upon child-scrawled poems lost in my childhood home. I used to hide in my closet and read the poems I wrote aloud or sing my poorly-written song lyrics to express my frustration at the boy in my third grade class who did not love me or my anger at my best friend who tore apart the poster we had made. Writing has been my outlet for as long as I can remember. As a preservice teacher headed toward a career as a secondary English teacher, I have met my fair share of little girls lost in books turned educators. However, I fell in love with writing the way most English nerds fall in love with reading. In measures large and small, I believe that writing has carried me through life when nothing else could. As I approached the tell-tale end of adolescence, I wrote "Words" and expressed how deeply writing had become a part of my life and my coping mechanisms.

As an English/Language Arts educator, I want to unravel how writing led me through countless difficult moments in my life. In what follows here, I will use self-reflection on my adolescent writing to inform my research on writing for therapeutic means and how this can be implemented into the classroom. To do this, I started by rereading the mass of writing that remained from my teen years. Reading these works (primarily poetry and journal entries), I reflected on how the practice of writing in a variety of methods for various purposes helped me to cope. The experience was therapeutic in its own right as I learned to forgive the shortcomings of



my adolescent mind (and writing capabilities). I was often frustrated by how I handled situations and worked through emotions I wish I never had. Much of my writing is unapologetically raw and honest. The practice of writing helped me expand my understandings of myself and the world around me. Eighteen-year-old me was right. After a few years that feel like decades, “the demon inside myself banging to be written down” *are* “the only words spoken” of my teenage self.

Through the reflection and analysis of my own adolescent writing and the research regarding the benefit and practice of writing, I have found that writing can not only heal us, but challenge us and sustain us. The following chapters will outline different ways to use writing as a means of well-being. Writing for well-being is creating an environment in which students can benefit during times in their lives that are notably painful, exceptionally pleasant, as well as simply mundane. Writing for well-being is writing to live better lives. It promotes a continual process, practice, and mindset. In the following chapters, we will explore facets of writing for well-being and find new ideas and inspirations to use writing in the classroom. First, we will review more context regarding the benefits of writing and the justification to bring more writing to adolescents.

### **Context: Writing For Healing**

The discovered benefits of writing are more expansive than I ever could have imagined when I used writing as a healing mechanism naturally during my adolescence. I was rarely writing with the full intent to create any physical or psychological result, but rather wrote because I enjoyed it and wanted to do it. Much of the writing I did throughout my life would be

considered expressive writing. Expressive writing<sup>1</sup> is writing about emotional or traumatic experiences in your life without concern for punctuation, spelling, or form and is often for writing as a form of therapy. Expressive writing used as a long-term practice has shown improvement in both physical and mental health<sup>2</sup>. While I do not intend to focus on some of these physiological impacts that writing can have, in this case specifically expressive writing, seeing research results like these show the power and potential benefit of writing as well as validate what I felt after rereading my writing from adolescence. Continued practice in writing about difficult emotional struggles can enhance our well-being in both our physical and mental health. Simply, writing can heal us.

The healing power of writing accounts for its use in therapy as well as encourages use in the classroom. Poetry writing, for example, has been implemented into the classroom to reduce anxiety and guilt while building coping skills for any difficult experiences that may arise (Saunders, 1997). The more general goal of writing for well-being can further promote these goals as studies and theories support writing's benefit. Next, we can consider *why* writing works. Writing can help us simply by taking the time to think more about our experiences and/or difficult emotions. Writing helps us organize our thoughts, find meaning in our experiences, break a negative mental cycle, and feel more comfortable reaching out to others (Harvard Health Publishing). No adult or child is immune from difficult emotions in their lives and writing is an option for necessary therapeutic healing.

<sup>1</sup> For more information about expressive writing refer to Harvard Health Publishing (n.d.), Baikie, K. & Wilhem, K. (2005), Klein, K., & Boals, A. (2001), and Pennebaker, J.W., & Seagal, J.D. (1999).

<sup>2</sup> Studies have shown that continued use of expressive writing is connected to positive effects on physical conditions such as sleep apnea, asthma, migraine headaches, and even cancers as well as “fewer stress-related visits to the doctor, improved immune system functioning, reduced blood pressure, improved lung function, improved liver function, fewer days in the hospital, improved mood/affect, feeling of greater psychological well-being, reduced depressive symptoms before examinations, [and] fewer post-traumatic intrusion and avoidance symptoms” (Baikie & Wilhem 2005).

**Context: Prevalence for Adolescents**

I have chosen to focus on my adolescent writing and on how writing can be used in a secondary classroom as an aid to adolescents during this and future difficult periods of time in their lives. Far too many young people are struggling with complex forms of trauma that we may or may not be able to see or identify. Writing can help these students with specific difficulties in their lives as well as the students who are primarily working through the typical toils of adolescence as it promotes understanding of self, problem solving, interpersonal skills, and emotional regulation (Utley & Garza, 2011). Teens are in a crucial time for identity formation and writing can help them to understand and navigate this experience. Finding mechanisms to young people cope with the stressors of life is becoming increasingly important as the rates of anxiety and depression among teenagers and young adults appear to be rising. Data suggests secondary-school-aged students are experiencing depressive episodes at higher rates as well as having these difficulties during the years following the traditional high school graduation age with prevalence of serious psychological distress and suicide ideation in young adults above the rate of older adults<sup>3</sup>.

Our school-aged children are faced with these higher rates of mental health difficulties<sup>4</sup> (Nutt, 2018) and the rates are not getting better in the differently difficult time as young adults after high school. There are several studies and theories that exist about why these increases may

<sup>3</sup> Information gathered from the National Survey on Drug Use and Health found that “Rates of major depressive episodes in the last year increased 52% 2005–2017 (from 8.7% to 13.2%) among adolescents aged 12 to 17 and 63% 2009–2017 (from 8.1% to 13.2%) among young adults 18–25” (Twenge et. al, 2019). This research further found that “serious psychological distress in the last month and suicide-related outcomes (suicidal ideation, plans, attempts, and deaths by suicide) in the last year also increased among young adults 18–25 from 2008–2017 (with a 71% increase in serious psychological distress), with less consistent and weaker increases among adults ages 26 and over,” which shows us that these increases are focused in teens and young adults more prevalently than in adults.

<sup>4</sup> In addition to increases in depressive episodes and serious psychological distress, anxiety is also becoming more prevalent; “Based on data collected from the National Survey of Children’s Health for ages 6 to 17, researchers found a 20 percent increase in diagnoses of anxiety between 2007 and 2012” (Nutt, 2018).

be happening. Philip Kendall, director of the Child and Adolescent Anxiety Disorders Clinic at Temple University and a practicing psychologist believes this increase comes from an environment of volatility saying “We used to have high confidence in our environment — now we have an environment that anticipates catastrophe” (Nutt, 2018). Teenagers and children today are facing unique stressors that are feeding into the state of their mental health. Though there are still debates about the true cause(s) of this increase including many that focus on the role of technology more heavily than Kendall’s attribution to volatility, the reality is that the students sitting in our nation’s classrooms are in need of dedicated attention to support their mental health.

Writing has always been a part of schools, however, given the growing mental health concerns in adolescents and the reduction of stigma around mental health, we are at a crucial time in which we can move schools closer to an environment that improves mental health rather than hurting it. Initiatives and programs to support students in their emotional success in addition to their academic success are prominent as social-emotional learning<sup>5</sup> increases in popularity (Tate, 2019). Social-emotional learning generally works to improve “self-awareness, self-management, social awareness, relationship skills, and responsible decision making” (NCSL, 2018). These skills additionally apply to my hope for increased writing for well-being.

<sup>5</sup> The current major federal legislation regarding education, the Every Student Succeeds Act (2015), leaves states in control of monitoring programs for social-emotional learning. More information can be found from The Collaborative for Academic, Social and Emotional Learning (CASEL)” The result of large scale social emotional learning programs is not yet clear.

### **Ch. 1: Writing as a Release**

My father lost his job of almost twenty years during the recession. I was in junior high and didn't understand what would happen. Over the next few years, my life changed silently from what it had been before. I tried to ignore the results of his lay-off and mostly succeeded. Now almost ten years after the inciting incident, I barely remember the moments that at the time overwhelmed me. However, reading through my old journals and poems from this time in my life displays not only what I experienced, but how I was able to cope when a single moment or comment overwhelmed me. I distinctly remember the way my gut twisted when I started seeing IRS letters on the kitchen counter. Unopened. My parents didn't talk about our finances often. Small moments revealed to me that we weren't doing well.

As a teenager, I was self-focused (like most) and unaccustomed to wanting for any material items. I might be told no when requesting an item at the store, but I never worried it was because we didn't have the money for it. When my dad snapped at me that I couldn't take my drivers' test because he couldn't afford my insurance and the next day my mom told me she didn't think we could buy a homecoming dress, I hit a wall. Part of the reason I remember these moments is because when I went upstairs to cry in my room that day, I also went upstairs and wrote a poem. I hadn't written one outside of school in a very long time, but before high school was out, I would write dozens and dozens more.

**TIP #1 to Write for Well-Being:** When you're feeling overwhelmed and need immediate relief, try writing it down.

The poem I wrote that very night is displayed below. I typed it haphazardly without concern for punctuation or even capitalization. The poem was not intended to win a Pulitzer. I simply felt an urge to express the emotions I couldn't handle in the moment. I wrote for an immediate release. I wrote poetry often as a younger child and for some reason or another, I decided to write a new poem that night. So, through metaphor, I was able to release the feelings that were bubbling up inside me. This act of writing created an initial relief and rereading the poem allowed me to realize I had been ignoring a major source of stress in my life. Examining the poem as an adult, I am admittedly distracted by the melodrama. However, as a teenager writing unapologetically how I felt in that moment let me take a deep breath as the words were released.

#### Dream Dust

One bad flower ruins a dozen  
One black mark destroys a painting  
And one twisted thought  
wrecks havoc on the thin veil  
I try to believe is my reality  
because through teary eyes I see  
I see more than my heart can hold  
and only my tears can relinquish the weight  
my fragile shield tumbles as if it were never there  
and it wasn't  
yet I try to rebuild  
I dream up  
and lie  
I gather up the broken shards  
I piece together my peace of mind  
but every time I feel safe  
every time I have faith  
it's blown away

the slightest of breezes brings me to my knees  
And I am lost  
I am wandering in the world I've created  
on dream dust  
but when I open my eyes wide and see  
truly see  
that very dream dust that made me feel safe  
that very dream dust that pulls me through  
stinks the truth into my eyes  
and I wait  
blind  
lost  
quivering  
and desperate  
waiting only for the next breeze

I've come to realize many people experience similar writing practices to my own and have carried these experiences with them. For example, Mark, one of the founder of Young Voices Rise poetry group, tells teens about his experience with writing during his youth. His words explain what I couldn't begin to understand about myself when I started writing "Dream Dust". He explains that when he was younger, he struggled with anger and he used writing to help his understanding in a confusing world:

'There's a lot of things you're not going to have control of. But what's beautiful about writing, and this is what I want you to remember, is that you can control every single element of what you need to say... And that is one of the things that helped me survive. And I'm not saying it's going to help you, but I promise you, the more you write and the more you speak, the easier it's going to be to find who you are and value that thing.'

(Williams, 2015)

The stress I felt from my family's finances was exacerbated by my lack of knowledge and control over the situation. I was rarely informed about our financial situation because of my young age, but this gave me a sense of helplessness and lack of control to fix this source of

anxiety and even fear in my life. As Mark told his students, poetry offers us an opportunity for full control where control is often limited, especially during adolescence.

In “Dream Dust,” I was able to take ownership of my emotions. I decided how to make my overwhelming worries into a series of metaphors: the bad flower, a fragile shield, and, ultimately, dream dust. This can be a major benefit of using writing, whether poetry or not, in moments when we need immediate relief. The ability to control something, anything, during a time of fear, anxiety, or hopelessness is extremely freeing and this act of writing helped both Mark and I survive. I do not, however, want to ignore the important caveat that Mark mentioned to his students in this session. He admits to his students that writing may not do the same for them as it did for him. However, writing can and does give us a better understanding of ourselves and what we have to say in moments of extreme emotional burden or simply in daily life. This ability to take some control by writing is one of the ways writing allows us to do this, especially when we are in need of release.

Throughout high school, I became increasingly dependent on poetry as a form of relief and release whenever I was overwhelmed by a thought or conflict. I often did not feel these emotions until I had quiet time to stop and think after a long day at school which made writing an accessible option for in-the-moment coping. I wrote poems about frustration and anger. I wrote poems flooded with angst and longing, crushes and friendships. However, I also used journaling to cope with sharp spikes in emotion. The act of writing allowed me to relieve myself of the pressure I felt with all of my feelings trapped inside. I could take a deep breath and was often able to remind myself that I could and would be able to keep moving. I was acknowledging and working through these difficult moments rather than pushing them away which better allowed me to cope and heal as well as move forward.



I used journaling often to talk through overwhelming situations and emotions in addition to my poetry. A year or two before I wrote “Dream Dust,” my family had been planning to move to Texas where my father would be offered a full-time position. For a few months, I was under the impression that I would be moving across the country. I told my friends and mentally prepared myself to start high school in a new state. I used a journal to help understand how I was feeling about this move. The process of writing when I felt overwhelmed by my concerns and anger toward moving allowed me to find some positivity and even excitement in the potential to start anew. After the job fell through, I had a difficult time dealing with feelings of loneliness.

On May 8, 2012, lost in negative emotions and feelings of isolation, I wrote “I wonder if I just disappeared for a day or two, what would change” in my journal. I didn’t feel wanted or appreciated in my friend groups and turned to writing to release these feelings I would otherwise have held in. I felt alone. I didn’t think there was anyone and was not prepared to talk to anyone about these feelings. In that moment, my journal was a source of comfort where I wasn’t ready for a person to be. Writing was a less direct way to think through my feelings on my own than talking about it would have been. I could take control by organizing my thoughts on the page without receiving any response from another person which might have further overwhelmed or embarrassed me. As an exercise in expressive writing, simply getting the thoughts on paper stopped my rumination on negative thoughts. Though this experience may not be considered traumatic, I still benefited from writing down my thoughts before I had the chance and desire to confide in someone else.

While most of the research discussed refers to writing in the form of reflection over time rather than immediate relief, the idea of “therapeutic distance” played a role in my journal entry incited from feelings of loneliness. Especially true for adolescents, writing can allow us to work

through our thoughts and emotions at a distance that one-on-one therapy or explaining to a friend does not provide (Utley & Garza, 2011). In the specific context of using writing as a precursor to talk therapy, this distance is helpful for many adolescents who are not seeking therapy by choice. However, whether seeking healing by choice, with a therapist, or alone, writing first allows us to externalize our problems rather than avoid them (Utley & Garza, 2011). This distance between the emotions inside me and placing them on the page helped me face my concern that my existence was not valued as a starting point for healing. This may not solve my difficulty instantly (it likely could not), but writing about it brings it outside of myself and similarly to writing the poem “Dream Dust” allows me to begin releasing the feelings rather than purely avoiding them. However, it should be noted that extreme or continued feelings of isolation or depression require further attention than individual coping by writing or other methods.

Sarah Fielding writes for *Insider* about how writing has helped her cope with her panic disorder. Free writing, without concern for form or quality, allows her to “make sense of the chaos in [her] brain.” The act of writing in a moment of intense anxiety can be a rewarding first step in writing for well-being. Writing settles and focuses the mind. Fielding explains that “When you're enveloped in panic or worry, it's all too easy to let it overcome you. By putting it on paper, you've found a way to sort through it that also sets your mind free” (Fielding, 2018). If the time and situation allows, writing your way through is a viable coping mechanism for difficult emotional moments.

Most of my admiration for writing as a source of healing comes from using writing in the moment I am feeling overwhelmed. This method is more focused on immediate fixes rather than routine habit for a life of well-being. While this was a natural tendency I developed in my childhood, I am unable to bestow this urge onto you or my future students. This tip for writing

for well-being is situational and not well aligned for use in a classroom. However, this method of coping can be encouraged and discussed with students. I believe that a burden placed on secondary English teachers is to show students the value and importance of writing in their lives in and outside of school. Writing for well-being can aid this burden. Teaching writing for coping can begin a complex process to make young people more resilient. Sarah Fielding explained that writing allows us to express our emotions though this can be done through other forms of expression such as physical art. The message we should give students is to express emotions rather than ignore or bottle them up.

**TIP #2 to Write for Well-Being:** Foster a mindset and environment to move *through* your emotions and experiences rather than move *around* them.

The way in which a teacher can foster these ideas in their classroom is dependent on countless factors such as grade level, content, administrative expectations, state standards, student needs, and personal teaching philosophies. With these rather large grains of salt, my suggestion is to explore the question of why we (we being the human race) create. For me, overarching, vague questions like this are just what I want to structure a lesson or unit that can talk about how the act of creation whether through writing, or painting, or singing, or anything else is part of our world. On a more concrete level, starting by understanding the value of expression may encourage students to seek out this expression in times of emotional toil outside of the classroom setting or teacher control. This kind of discussion is of course more effective once rapport and classroom community have been established.

Creating familiar processes and terminology is also a necessary step in creating a classroom that is conducive to writing for well-being in school and encouraging healthy forms of expression outside of school. We have talked about journaling and the use of expressive writing, but using names for these terms that are more aligned with your personality and your students' interest may better stick in students' minds. When they need a moment of release outside of class, they may more readily think of a term like "think in ink" rather than expressive writing. I often think of my emotional writing as word vomit. The kind of writing that lurches in your stomach and spills onto the page. In *Writing to Heal the Soul*, Susan Zimmermann uses the idea of "upchuck writing." When we are overwhelmed by emotions, especially negative ones, Zimmermann tells us to "Write about the little things that keep adding up: Nothing is going right; nothing ever will. Vent, rage, whine. Don't think, just write. Call it upchuck writing. It's how you get it all out. Sometimes you need to unleash" (2002). We need to teach our students that while writing is often used as an academic language to express our ideas and analyze texts, it is also a tool for everyday life. A tool to unleash. Find the language that makes sense for you, your classroom, and your students and encourage the practice of release. There certainly must be a name for this writing that is fresh and new without alluding to getting sick.

After beginning the discussion and implementing a language of writing for well-being, we should provide our students with the tools they need. For writing focused purely on relief and release rather than careful thought, this may involve the practice of writing without stopping to think about *how* we are writing. One of Zimmermann's tips is to write as fast as your hand will allow you to (2002). Another suggestion is to remove the screen from writing for release and provide the old-school equipment of pen and paper. In her book, *What It Is*, author, teacher, and artist, Lynda Barry tells us that "Writing is practicing a physical activity with a state of mind"

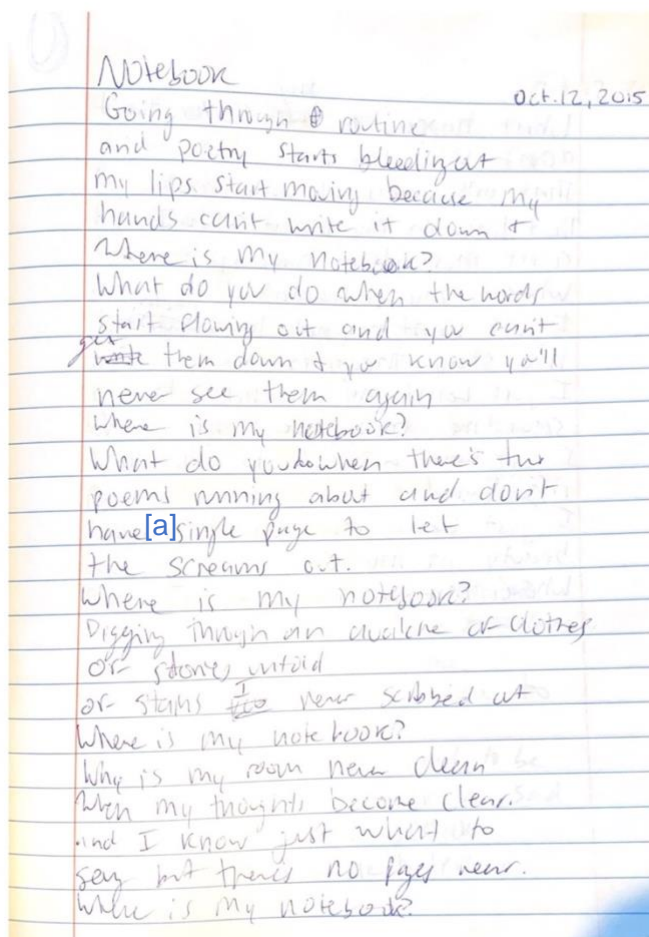
(2008). Barry describes the role of movement in writing by hand. She even encourages us to write the alphabet or draw a spiral rather than stop our pen when we need to think for a minute during a writing session. The physical act of writing by hand rather than typing is a different experience that many people find more meaningful and that research<sup>6</sup> shows is more effective for our memory.

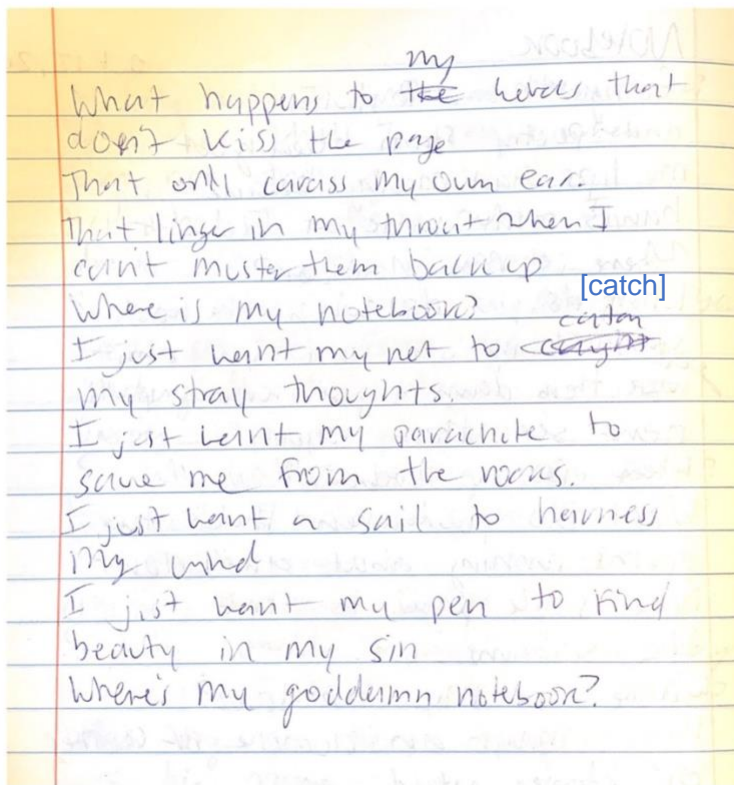
Much of how we create our mindset to foster writing comes from the physical tools we use. Even a pen rather than a pencil can keep our hand moving faster and make our thoughts feel more permanent. For example, it could be an interesting exercise to see if students' free-writes are different when using different colored pens. Susan Zimmermann believes that even the look of our notebook can help or hurt us in the endeavor to write. Zimmermann advises to be careful with the notebook we decide to use: "You need a notebook, the simpler the better. [...] Your notebook must not intimidate you. It can't be too elegant, because then you will feel that you can only write 'finished' work in it" (2002). I will admit that I had never once considered this. In fact, on multiple occasions I have purchased nice notebooks with the intent to motivate myself to write in them. What I found was just as Zimmermann suggests. I held onto a leather-bound notebook for months before using it because I wanted to write something worthy on the first page. Most students will be hesitant or completely opposed to writing in the first place. Writing for many people is already intimidating. In our classrooms, we must remove as many barriers to writing as we can and this may begin with the notebook itself. The lucky thing is that the simpler notebooks are also usually the most affordable and easiest to use.

<sup>6</sup> Goodwin, B. (2018). The magic of writing stuff done: is the pen mightier than the laptop? *ASCD*, 78-79.  
Mueller, P. A., & Oppenheimer, D. M. (2014). The pen is mightier than the keyboard: Advantages of longhand over laptop note taking. *Psychological Science*, 25(6), 1159–1168.  
Stevenson, N. C., & Just, C. (2014). In early education, why teach hand-writing before keyboarding? *Early Childhood Education Journal*, 42(1), 49–56.

**TIP #3 to Write for Well-Being:** Whenever possible, write by hand in a simple notebook.

Whether for “upchuck writing” or writing for other purposes, I have used a mix of paper and computer composing. I personally have found writing by hand more natural, especially during moments of release or thought gathering. Handwritten pieces of writing from my adolescence have also been more meaningful and nostalgic to read. In my self-research, I found a poem I wrote my senior year of high school that outlines my pull toward writing for release as well as a desire to write by hand. The poem is pictured below (a typed version is also available on page 75):





After digging hurriedly through my childhood home, I scribbled this poem on the specific notebook I was trying to find. The metaphors I chose to use, while I might have edited them upon revision, still ring true to how writing was a lifeline in my life. I equated my notebook to a net, a parachute, and a sail. When we write as an avenue for necessary release, writing can be all of these things: a net that catches our feelings, ideas, and anxieties, a parachute that saves us from the turmoil ready to swallow us whole, and a sail to harness these energies and keep us moving forward.

## Chapter 2: Writing to Understand

Often I have found myself driven to write in moments of release. In addition, reflecting on the words I put on the page has helped me better understand how I was feeling in that moment. In my poem “Dream Dust,” I was able to see how these small moments or comments from my parents were impacting me. In the end, this poem was much more about letting something out than it was about letting understanding in. Writing can be categorized in just about a million ways. I see writing for well-being has taking on two major functions: writing for release and writing to understand. In this chapter, I will explore how writing can help us and our students better understand themselves and the world around them.

**TIP #4 for Writing for Well-Being:** Write to know what you think and who you are.

So often in this world we move through each day without any moment of pause. As my days become crowded by stressors, I am also quite guilty of never allowing myself time to think and reflect on my life. I believe writing is an excellent form of expression to stop and take the time to hear ourselves. In her TEDx Talk “Look deeper -- write -- the wonders of writing,” Nicoletta Demetriou (as a scholar in the field of life writing) implores us to write frequently as she claims that “After training yourself to write without thinking for one, two, or three weeks, then you suddenly begin to hear your own voice much more clearly than before” (2015). Writing can open a door to who we really are when we are only listening to the voice within our own minds. The practice of writing allows us to understand our own thinking through pause and reflection. This is also encouraged by the idea of spontaneous writing for release, but intentional



writing without immediate cause allows us to hear our normal voice that we so often drown out by keeping our ears full of music and our minds distracted by stimuli.

During my final semester of high school, I took an elective creative writing class. In this class, we had to write every day. It didn't matter what we wrote or if it would be considered "good" writing. The simple act of writing can reveal deeper understandings to us. Most adolescents do not have the discipline, means, or motivation to write without thinking in order to promote a process over product, however many (not all) adolescents will write if we ask them to do so in a classroom. By nature of a creative writing class, my teacher, Ms. Sarah Dennis, was able to ask us to write every day. I have included one of the results of this writing for me. As a teenager, I was often angry and sarcastic and this behavior just seemed like part of who I fundamentally was for most of my teen years. When I wrote this poem, I began to think more critically about the impact my attitude could have on the people around me. I began to better understand myself and my influence by writing and then later revising this poem.

*Days Like These (February 1, 2016)*

Block out the world on days like these.  
Keep your lips sealed and your eyes closed.  
These are the days your words splitter in the air  
Because you can't smooth your tone.  
These are the days your eyes carve scars in a glance.  
These are the days you stay quiet because  
You don't mean what you are saying.

Bitter taste in your mouth  
As every word spoken around is offensive.  
Every word rubs poison into the wounds  
that you never thought would open.  
Every word snatched in mid-air by your sarcastic snap.

These are the days you move up on most hated lists,  
These are the days you don't want to look at the ones you love.

Ignore the world on days like these,

Or you might burn it down.  
Shield your eyes on like these,  
Or you might be forever blinded from the light.  
Plug your ears on days like these,  
Or you might hear the voices in your head.  
Purse your lips on days like these,  
Or you might never realize  
You're kissing them all goodbye.  
Block out the world on days like these,  
Or the world may never let you back in.

I started writing this poem in my class because I was asked to write and I was having a bad day. I was writing about myself, but the act of writing and listening to my own voice helped me write my way to a realization regarding how damaging my words can be. Of course this is dramatized, but when I wrote without thinking I wrote about being cast out from the world if I let myself say everything that came to my mind on *days like these*.

“Days Like These” is only one of countless examples of how writing helped me better understand myself and what I care about. When I wrote regularly, especially during my creative writing class, I had a deeper grasp on who I was and who I wanted to be than I think I have ever had since. Giving our students the chance to write uninhibited can help them understand who they are. Knowing yourself and your voice is essential to finding what you think, what you care about, and who you want to be. However, this can be terrifying. It is why Demetriou says writing is scary for so many people. Writing forces us to hear our own voice. While this can be intimidating for a person of any age, we must acknowledge the importance of finding voice during adolescence. Remembering that these are key years in identity formation, we can use writing to help our students better understand themselves.

Expressive writing is often implemented as a therapeutic tool for patients to make sense of the difficult experiences in their lives to aid in their understanding of their emotions.

“Expressive writing as a tool in counseling offers clients a unique way to unravel stressful reactions to self, others, and events and to formulate a more controlled and logical understanding of their experiences” in this case with the attention of a trained listener (Utley & Garza, 2011). The key idea to bring from the practice of expressive writing is the benefit of unraveling. When we unravel ideas we better understand them. This isn’t really a new idea. However, this process of unraveling can be done with difficult experiences in our lives that we are still working through as well as with any kind of complex emotion or concept. Perhaps the practice of breaking down an idea for better understanding is taught with a piece of literature and then presented as a similar resource for writing through a tough experience. For example, we read and analyze thoughts and actions of literary characters and similarly we can write to better understanding our own thoughts and actions. In the end, the act of writing brings us to a more controlled and logical understanding of experiences or ideas.

When done thoughtfully and done often, just about any type of writing can help develop a variety of skills. The process of starting within ourselves can help us work toward that idea of well-being. With the practice of journaling, for example, we can better cope and heal when we make meaning of our experiences through words (Utley & Garza, 2011). On a very basic level, the practice of free-writing in the classroom is an implementation of the idea of writing to help us understand. Whether you use the term free-write, quick-write, think in ink, or any other name, the practice of taking a couple minutes to write on a question or transcribe their thoughts can help students better remember and understand the content or concept being taught as well as the student’s own thinking on the topic. Author David McCullough said that “to write is to think, and to write well is to think well.” I am hopeful that most English/Language Arts teachers would agree with this. Our job is to create better readers, writers, and thinkers. I further believe that our

job is to help build better people and these all come together when we challenge students to write to help them think. Whether is it writing about the opening line of a novel to writing about the social significance of poetry as a genre or writing about *why* you hate writing to writing about the toughest loss in your life, writing makes us think.

Writing for understanding can yield products. “Days Like These” started as a rushed poem to express a feeling I had that revealed something more. However, the version you see above is also revised. I took the time to rethink and change lines and punctuation to not only understand myself and my place within the world around me, but also to convey that to the reader. When I turned in this poem for my creative writing portfolio, I gained the skills of the state standards while also gaining skills to be a more self-aware and reflective human being. This kind of writing is a process and it can be used to scaffold higher levels of writing or analysis. Writing to better understand can also help us practice skills more in line with the social-emotional learning focus. Either way, this cycle is similar to the idea of Lectio Divina which means divine reading. This is a Christian concept, but can certainly be applied outside of a religious context. This practice is focused on reading scripture and following these steps as the passages are reread: Lectio (Read), Meditatio (Reflect), Oratio (Respond), and Contemplatio (Contemplate). This process asks us to go beyond initial reading to reflect and connect to what we have read, respond and interact with it, and then contemplate the ideas in a moment of rest. Students could follow this cycle with any kind of text. They can use this process when writing a response to a novel. They could also do this with a short video clip or even use their own memory of a moment in their life as a text to engage with. As long as the steps are explained, students can learn the process of Lectio Divina and fill out writing for each step as a regular classroom task.

While Lectio Divina is traditionally used to form a deeper understanding of scripture and thus a stronger connection with God, the process can also be used to find deeper understanding of other kinds. In some cases, Lectio Divina is connected to a fifth step of Actio (Action). This step is fairly self-explanatory. What action should be taken in your life now? This is the sail component from my “Notebook” poem. How can we move forward after having this dedicated time and experience of thought, reflection, and understanding? I’ll admit that I have never been very practiced in this step of my writing in general and especially not with concern to my well-being. I think that is true for many of us. We may be aware enough and willing enough to take the time to better understand ourselves or a situation, but to take this information into action is time-consuming and often difficult. I can only think of one notable moment in which I knowingly used writing to propel myself forward into some kind of action.

Though I had graduated high school, my freshman year of college was very much still part of my adolescence and age never makes us immune from emotional turmoil anyway. Even after just the few months between high school graduation and fall semester, my writing had notably decreased. On the first day of classes, I took the local bus to Walmart and gallivanted around. Walking back to my dorm room, my biggest worry was being out later than I wanted to be on the first day. I received a call from my mother. Almost instantly I could tell she was speaking through tears. My grandmother had died unexpectedly. After a blur of a second day of classes, she called me the next day to tell me my uncle had been found having passed away the night before. Two hours from home, I had lost two family members from two different sides of the family in my first and second days as a college student. It likely comes as no surprise to hear that this was one of the most difficult weeks of my life. Through the next semester, I wrote sparsely, but it was the only active coping I attempted at all. Rereading my journal entries now, I

realize I did not write often enough and that the writing alone was not all the support I should have sought. Nonetheless, after months of long days and sparing releases through writing, I sat down with one of my journals during a final moment of clarity.

A week or so before, I had responded to a letter from a friend in high school. We were attempting to be pen pals. I wrote the letter in a rush with tears and gasps for air then I addressed it and sent it off. As soon as my friend read it, she called me. She said that after reading the letter she was instantly worried and didn't think I was okay. I wasn't. During finals week, I wrote "I need to find a way to heal. I've trained myself to practice fine for so long that I barely even recognize for myself when I'm not fine. I'm going to try and write down everything that I'm lucky to have or that has made me feel good— even if just for a minute" and I did just that. I wrote down a short list of good things or people in my life. I was acting after contemplation helped me realize that I was not healing. I was simply tricking even myself into believing that I was fine. With the final reminders to myself that "I am okay. I will feel better. I will feel truly happy again. I am loved," I signed my name and closed my notebook. I put the notebook away and have not written in it since. I knew that was the natural end to a journal I had started in the midst of high school. Looking back at that entry, it feels like the moment I truly began my transition from high school to adulthood. I was surrounded by a lot of loud and overwhelming wind, but I finally let myself feel the power of the wind and harness it with writing as my sail.

There is value in letting things out to nurture well-being, however we also need to let things in. As much as we need to release all the negative thoughts and overwhelming emotions, we need to let in positivity and healing. Susan Zimmermann takes the process I used in my final journal entry to a higher level in two of her recommended writing exercises. She asks us to write down specific things we appreciate in our lives. She asks for thirty where I let myself end at

eight. Just today, I saw a student for the second class day in a row completely disenchanted with her essay that was due in the coming days. She laid her head on her desk and insisted she would delete everything she had written and get a zero of out 400 points. In a moment like this, she may have benefited from the freedom to take a break from the assignment to instead write down everything that was bothering her and then try to write thirty things she had appreciation for. Of course, this may not work, but it *could* work and that's enough to try.

Another very simple idea of Zimmermann's is to write a love list. She wisely reminds her readers that we often forget the things we love. The task is to create a list of anything that you love. It could be a person, a song, a book, a feeling—anything. The toughest part is to write one hundred. I love this demand to write so many because we all can. Our students are constantly facing challenges large and small. We cannot know what these are, but we can invite our students to let a little love in. This is an excellent exercise to have in your back pocket for a rainy day. Maybe after a draining standardized test or a difficult announcement, take the time to let your students try this exercise. This is a list they can keep and refer back to when they need a pick me up. On a more practical level, this exercise could be an engaging way to brainstorm for a personal narrative or as a get-to-know-you activity at the beginning of the year.

A tendency toward writing helps teach and encourage our students to be critical interpreters of the world. Though most of my writing promoted self-awareness, I also used poetry when dealing with social issues within the relatively small world around me. During my senior year, I dealt with a conflict that emerged within my friend group. Since I was so prone to writing and my creative writing class gave me the time, I thought through the sides of this conflict through two mirroring poems. As our friend groups merged, my boyfriend's friend,

Joey, and my friend, Megan<sup>7</sup>, started dating. In brief, after only a week or two of dating the two had sex and a few days later Joey broke up with Megan. There were a lot of assumptions made about Joey specifically from these events and a divide formed as my close friends tried to understand and react to the situation. I had known Megan for just about my entire life and I knew she was eager to explore sex, while I learned that Joey had felt pressured and not ready for sex. While sitting in my creative writing class, I took the information I had and wrote from two perspectives based off of Joey and Megan. These poems are included below in the order in which I wrote them though these are the edited drafts.

His Story (*January 13, 2016*)

He doesn't understand what he's done to deserve this.  
A world so ordinary turns to something beyond his wildest dreams  
And he is paralyzed,  
He has her  
And a grasp tight on happiness.  
But the purest act of human nature  
Hidden under society's flames  
Unveils not the union he had wished for.  
The reality is a cheap sequel to the fantasy.  
Confused and overwhelmed.  
The pit in his stomach grows.  
Bit by bit it consumes him,  
He is nothing.  
The calls grow louder and louder.  
He is spiraling into emptiness.  
Being asked to give what he cannot find for himself.

Stand taller and fear the straightened spine.  
Smile and feel the cracking lips.  
Scream the silence out of the fit of wonder.  
Wondering whose pain is thicker,  
Wondering how to shave it down  
To build back up.  
Never call yourself leftovers  
Because the world cries you a champion.

<sup>7</sup> These names are pseudonyms.



You are victorious  
Don't you dare be ashamed.  
You won this battle,  
Can't you see?

He is never allowed to cry for himself.  
He must only ever consider agony in her name,  
Never running through his own veins.

Scream out your pain,  
Embrace the beauty of it.  
Stand up  
And never fear your spine straighten.  
You are victorious.  
Now embrace it.

Her Story (*January 13, 2016*)

She doesn't understand what she's done to deserve this.  
A wish on a star,  
Too far until the light finally returned to her,  
Lit perfection in her eyes.  
One path in the midst of creation  
And the warmth of his presence crafted a new journey.  
A sprint, even toward happiness,  
Can only last so long.  
If you speed toward beauty,  
Toward love,  
Toward lust,  
You might just trip over the finish line.  
She saw it as a leap of faith,  
But while her desire was opening the door,  
Her hands were still fumbling at the gate.  
Society has always told her never to want it,  
But has taught her to dream of it.  
The purest act of human nature,  
Hidden under society's flames,  
Was indeed her dream.  
Yet, now she is terrified to wake up,  
To open her eyes and feel the light drip from them.  
The scream from a fabricated reality echoes in her ears.

You keep your filthy lips shut.  
You're washed up goods.  
Nothing but a white dress stained with blood,  
No longer worthy of being worn.  
Cry your eyes out, dear

And pray that the only people to hear you  
are the voices within you.

She feels her life crumble  
And in one voice shall she rebuild.  
In one voice to speak for the thousands,  
Will she never let herself be labeled as leftovers.  
She wears her tainted dress not as a man's victory,  
But as the plea that she wiser this way, stronger this way.  
She spits in the face of society  
That she is not innocent  
and she would never want to be,  
Never again the little girl  
once stuck in her wishes on a star.  
She will create her own light  
And never be told to wipe the tears from her eyes.

I likely would not have written these poems without the opportunity in class. I would have taken the situation at a much shallower level and I would not have learned as much as I did from the experiences of my peers. In "His Story," I practiced empathy with a teenage boy who didn't want to have sex and reacted against the way society would have expected him to. In both poems, I took on the voice of a society that tells young people very gendered messages about sex. I better understood the pressures placed on men and boys to want sex and champion their success over girls and women as prizes. I tried to understand Joey specifically and the pressures of masculinity in general. I began to grapple with ideas of toxic masculinity as well as sex positivity for women. My writing not only helped me navigate the intricacies of the social conflict in my life, but contemplate the gendered societal pressures on teenagers. These are big concepts. This is the kind of deep thinking that we try to facilitate when we read literature full of similar complexities. I may be the one who wrote these poems, but with dedicated time, scaffolding, and encouragement, writing can help any teenager grasp complex concepts within their life and outside of it if they write in a way that allows understanding in.

### Chapter 3: Writing in Variety

Throughout my life, I have developed a tendency toward writing poetry. Although, I did write songs as well during my childhood before moving more exclusively into poetry after realizing I really cannot sing. As you have read, I also kept some journals and diaries. These different kinds of writing have served different as well as similar purposes in my life. While these types of writing that I naturally lean toward have helped me in my well-being, especially during adolescence, keeping up a variety of writing and expression is often effective. Writing in variety allows us to explore different aspects of our lives while expanding our skill in writing and understanding of writing forms.

**TIP #5 to Write for Well-Being:** Use a variety of writing mediums. Find what you like and what works best in certain situations.

Even when you know what kind of writing you prefer to use, breaking out of your usual patterns can prove to be beneficial. I usually lean heavily on metaphor and figurative language when I write creatively. However, once in my college poetry club we were challenged to write in plain language without figurative language. This restriction helped me write about a difficult experience that had happened months before. The poem I wrote is included below.

Fast (*February 8, 2018*)

I learned it in a simple acronym.

Fast.

F. A. S. T.

Face.

The drooping on one side of the face is a symptom of stroke.

Arms.

The inability to raise one's arm all the way is a symptom of stroke.

Speech.

The difficulty in speech or slurred speech is a symptom of stroke.

Time.

At the sight of symptoms of stroke, act quickly. Time is important.

Face.

The drooping is so slight. It isn't a symptom of stroke.

Arms.

Her arms are still functioning fine, she doesn't have symptoms of stroke.

Speech.

She is talking to me fine, she's just tired, it isn't a symptom of stroke.

Time.

My mother is not having a stroke, I will send her to bed, she just needs time.

Face.

I thought her smile would never look the same.

Arms.

I thought I would always nervously watch her steer the car.

Speech.

I thought I could never talk to her the same way.

Time.

I thought my mother would fade from me because I didn't act fast.

I did not act fast.

I waited the night.

I waited the drive.

I waited till it was confirmed.

I didn't wait too long,

Time is important.

Act fast.

As stated in the poem, I am writing about my experience seeing my mother have a stroke and being the only one able to address the symptoms I had seen. This happened at the end of July and I didn't write about it until February. If I had tried to write about this in a flowery and descriptive manner like much of my other poetry, I think it would have been too difficult and overwhelming to get on the page. Using the challenge to write in more plain language, I was able to release much of the stress and guilt that was lingering from the event. Having a structure, even created by myself, I could express my emotions and the details of the situation in short snapshots

that revealed the guilt that I wasn't coping with in fewer words. This poem isn't necessarily moving to the reader, but it was extremely healing for me to remember my mother's stroke at a distance while still letting myself acknowledge that while I did not act fast as I had been taught to, "I didn't wait too long." Writing in this way helped me cope with the lingering anxiety of the moment while appreciating my mother's continued health after her stroke.

Not all students will have a textbook-defined traumatic experience. I was ultimately very lucky with the life I had in my adolescence, but every child has something they should be working through. I haven't yet included any of them, but the majority of the poems I wrote as a teenager were about crushes that I had on a variety of boys. There are plenty of journal entries and poems about classic high school drama that doesn't faze me now, but felt like the most important thing when it was happening. Encouraging and assigning students a variety of writing styles and prompts can increase their academic skills as well as help them cope with the various highs and lows of being a teenager.

### *Poetry*

Poetry lends itself best to a variety of forms to begin with. I generally think of free verse as a great way to focus on writing for release, while poetic forms work well for reflective writing more focused on finding a deeper understanding. While "F.A.S.T" would still be considered free verse, the more structured order lent better for me to reflect on a past event rather than release emotions from a recent event. We all have preferences in writing, but sometimes a specific topic demands that we try a new form. Two-time United States Poet Laureate Natasha Trethewey uses a lot of poetic forms and on that topic she says she uses them "As a tool of restraint. I'm writing about experiences that are pretty difficult for me" (Anderson, 2008). When we are asking students to write creatively in general, many will not know where to start. If we then ask them to

write about something important, meaningful and/or difficult in their lives this can become overwhelming. A poetic form can make it easier as it does for Trethewey as an award-winning poet.

Not only do these forms make some topics more approachable, but it can also help students decide or discover the most important aspects of their narrative or topic. Trethewey's "Incident" is a perfect example of how using a poetic form can reveal a clearer focus to a difficult memory. The poem is about the day the KKK burned a cross in Trethewey's yard when she was a child. She explains her use of the pantoum form within this poem: "I tried writing 'Incident' for a long time with a straight narrative lyric, but it kept getting bogged down by the incident, reduced to a little incident about the cross burning. It wasn't until I turned to that other envelope of form and repetition that I even understood what the poem was about -- [not centered on the incident but] how we remember the incident." (Anderson, 2008). By turning to a different form during difficulty writing about this incident in her life, Trethewey found a compelling and impactful way to express the importance of memory in relation to her family's experience. Structure gave a similar benefit to me while writing "F.A.S.T" and could be an enabling tool as well as a tool of restraint for students.

For therapeutic means, poetry can be notably valuable when bringing a formal shape and unity to chaotic thoughts (Philips, Linington, Penman, 1999). Where journaling allows for chaotic ramblings, formal poetry asks us to slow our thoughts and be more intentional with our language. The demands of poetry, especially within a poetic form, can help us think more slowly and meaningfully about our experience. This can help us process and heal from complex emotions. This can also be difficult for unpracticed or anxious writers. Even giving students a poetic form may not ease nerves in fact it could worsen them. As with all complex skills, it is

best to build in scaffolding. Laura Bean, who wrote “How Creative Writing Can Increase Students’ Resilience,” provides us with how she makes poetry more approachable for her students. She suggests having students write poems as a class to practice the creative process. Bean writes “Another way to build resilience in the face of external challenges is to shore up our inner reserves of hope—and I’ve found that poetry can serve as inspiration for this. For the writing portion of the lesson, I invite students to ‘get inside’ poems by replicating the underlying structure and trying their hand at writing their own verses. I create poem templates, where students fill in relevant blanks with their own ideas.” I love this idea of using poetry to help tap into hope reserves. Bean does this with a step by step process to ease students into poetry through structure. The Golden Shovel poem would be a great resource for this process since it uses lines from an already existing poem. The Golden Shovel, first created by Terrance Hayes, asks writers to take one line from a poem and use the words (in order) to end each line of a new poem. Depending on the poem you use as a starting point, you can encourage students to explore common struggles of adolescence through the writing.

Unsurprisingly, I am a huge proponent of poetry writing in the classroom. I find that poetry’s proclivity toward figurative language, notably metaphor, can help students work through their thoughts and experiences without always needing to give the reader all of the details of their experiences. Whereas the possibility to use clear and revealing language is also possible. Poetry is generally a short form of writing which lends itself to being written and edited without the same class time needed for a polished short story for example. Example poems similarly can be read easily within a class period if not within five minutes. Spoken word poetry continues to have a growing presence online and can be used for therapeutic purposes. There is at least one if not dozens of spoken word poems accessible online about common difficulties in

adolescence. Watching these videos can not only help in the writing process, but simply hearing strangers going through similar troubles can be helpful in emotional well-being and the building of resilience.

### *Narrative/Story*

While I can't think of single time I personally used narrative writing for the aid of healing, coping, or processing experiences in my life, some argue that it is more beneficial than the poetry writing and journaling that I did use. The idea of control can play a role when writing narratively as we create the logical organization of a story rather than order within the poetic constraints. While I did not take control of my adolescent emotional rollercoasters with story, personal narratives seem to be the most common form of personal creative writing assigned in classrooms. I do think these writing experiences are quite memorable for many of us. At least, I know I can remember vividly writing about the shower in the RV my family took on vacation though I cannot remember when this vacation was or any memories beyond what I wrote in that personal narrative. One of my earliest memories of writing was the story I wrote about Pop Pop's (my great grandfather's) funeral. I can remember my mom visiting my second grade classroom where I read my story aloud in a small group. This was likely the first time that my work ever caused another person to cry. A year or two later, I wrote about the upsetting experience of my dog being hit by a car. My golden retriever was completely unharmed by the car approaching a stop sign, but that doesn't make the emotions I felt any less real and the process of writing any less of an aid in processing the experience and fear I felt when it happened. If I were a child psychologist, I might find that these writing experiences were fundamental in growing my emotional intelligence at a young age.



Therapeutic writing with a heavy narrative function has been found to have similar if not improved benefit to the research regarding expressive writing and journaling. Asking students to write a personal narrative with a prompt to encourage a story based in a stressful experience can not only meet the standards of narrative writing, but aid students in working through their understanding of their memory and possibly have health benefits (Klein & Boals, 2001; Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997). Of course this is a tricky balance to strike between encouraging students to work through these difficult memories and respecting the boundaries and privacy of your students. It is important to remember that writing about recent acutely traumatic events may not be constructive for students and will likely breach your ability and expertise into need for assistance by a licensed professional in psychology.

A study completed at State University of New York compared participants who wrote with a narrative focus and those who wrote in a more traditional expressive writing manner. The study found that “Greater narrative structure was associated with mental health gains, and self-rated emotionality of the essays was associated with less perceived stress at follow-up” (Danoff-Burga, Mosherb, Seawell, & Ageed, 2010). This suggests that narrative structures can be even more beneficial to mental health and thus well-being than more free form writing in traditional expressive writing. It should be noted that the study also found that the control group of expressive writing had higher rates of participants rating their writing as meaningful and emotional than the narrative group. While narrative writing may not feel quite as meaningful during the writing process, the benefits to well-being are present.

### ***Drama***

Drama is another genre that I had never considered as beneficial to the therapeutic process. As with each kinds of writing, there is a whole body of research and theory regarding

drama therapy. Weaving drama writing into an English classroom (or a theatre classroom) allows students to study yet another form of writing both in practice of writing and analysis of the texts. Writing a monologue or play can challenge students to try something new and encourage students who prefer drama over other forms of writing. By the nature of drama, this writing can move into the practice of performance. While drama writing may be less fitting for expressive writing on personal struggles, this type of writing allows for a great deal of empathy. I could have written the poems “Her Story” and “His Story” as two complimenting monologues or imagined a dialogue between Megan and Joey. Whether a student is writing a scene or short play instead of a personal narrative or writing a story that is completely fictional they are practicing skills of empathy. Drama writing is extremely character-focused which can help “those who are in a situation in which it is difficult to feel empathy, it can be enormously beneficial to ask participants to write in a voice of someone else, and a dramatic monologue offers that as a form” (Philips, Linington, Penman, 1999). Both the writing and acting from a different perspective is a practice in empathy that will help students be more socially aware as they move through adolescence and into adulthood.

### *Comics*

Secondary English teacher Michael L. Kersulov uses narrative comics in his classroom as a form of the traditional personal narrative. Throughout his practice in his classroom, he found that “While students initially produced nonfiction comics about their life experiences as a way to investigate the process of writing, their comics became tools to explore their memories and identities” (Kersulov, 2016). Comic writing is an additional tool for students to practice habits that will make them more reflective people. Having a method that is less text-heavy and allows for students to use their artistic ability may be exactly the genre that some students need in order

to build a habit that they may take with them outside of the classroom. One of Kersulov's students, Christy used the comic writing curriculum to address issues with her parents, suicide, and self-confidence that were prevalent in her life. Her writing works toward well-being: "After finishing one comic, Christy commented, 'Comics made it a little easier since I wasn't directly speaking.' Using the medium helped her express moments of emotional distress during the writing process as she employed fictional elements that did not diminish but promoted her message and its authenticity" (Kersulov, 2016).

Comics can be a stronger option than more traditional writing practices for a variety of reasons. A student may be working through extremely difficult struggles in which, like for Christy, comics can allow them to address these emotions without needing to be as direct in their expression. Many students are far below grade level in their writing ability and comics can help the use of similar thought processes as other writing for well-being without being inhibited by their lower writing skills. This can be similarly helpful to students who are English Language Learners. Comic writing for all students can help them with skills and analysis in symbolism, metaphor, and visual representations. Comics can build students' resilience and well-being while challenging their academic thinking in a less traditional way.

### ***Variety and Choice***

There are debates and studies to try and prove the benefit of various types of writing as well as a few studies to compare different methods. When it comes down to it, there is no perfect method to produce the best mental or physical health benefits. The State University of New York study that found evidence supporting narrative-focused writing over traditional expressive writing acknowledged that "Individual difference variable might moderate the effects of the different types of writing on health outcomes" (Danoff-Burga, Mosherb, Seawellc, & Ageed,

2010). While we can look at trends to see methods they are most commonly effective, the individual person doing the writing is different and thus the effectiveness of different writing may be more or less effective for each individual.

Students can benefit from choice and variety. Universal Design for Learning (UDL), first laid out by Anne Meyer and David Rose, is a commonly used outline for lesson planning that considers students' individual differences. The focus is on removing barriers that prevent students from achieving and displaying the learning objectives. UDL has three main components: representation, action and expression, and engagement (CAST.org, 2019). Implementing a variety of writing styles and genres can engage different students at different times. Allowing for options within the action and expression of standards such as the option to write about an event in your life by comic, narrative, drama, or poetry can both engage students and allow them to better express what they are learning.

### ***Prompts and Activities***

Whether students are writing in the same form or different ones, the use of prompts is a helpful and often necessary part of implementing writing for well-being in the classroom. Often a prompt can create meaningful writing and thinking that would not have happened without the direction being provided. Many of the texts I have mentioned include dozens of activities and prompt ideas. There is a list of which texts have more exercises that may be helpful to refer to when lesson planning as part of references. A prompt could be a specific form, a topic, or a question. A prompt can also be a challenge or a rule to follow. In Ms. Sarah Dennis' creative writing class, one day we had to write a very short story that included two of the dozens of

<sup>8</sup> Universal Design for Learning extends far beyond a variety of writing types. More information about using UDL in the classroom can be found at CAST.org.



of writing is valuable to help students be well-rounded writers as well as prompt a practice of writing for well-being.

### Chapter 4: Writing Routines

The concept of well-being demands a process of taking care of physical and emotional health and a tendency toward reflection and improvement. For writing to have a role in enhancing and sustaining well-being, it needs to be done often if not in a regular routine. Outside of the classroom setting, I have never been successful in creating a daily routine of writing. I have had a habit of writing for years, but the day-to-day routine never stayed with me. I think this is common for many of us when trying to start any type of routine, but that also makes using routines in the classroom that much more important. During high school, writing became so engrained in my life that I would often write short stanzas in my iPhone notes simply because a thought came to my mind. Whenever a thought or experience lingered or distracted me I would often turn to writing a haphazard poem or a rambling journal entry. Below is an example of a poem I started when I had a thought regarding one of my high school crushes.

Untitled (*February 1, 2016*)

I just thought of you  
Only to realize I haven't been thinking of you.  
It's been so long  
Since I have felt free of you.  
Since, feeling your pull,  
I don't remember ever being free  
As least not long enough  
For me to believe it.

This untitled, unedited, and incomplete poem is a fragment of how writing helped me move through struggles over a period of time rather than in a single sitting. In these lines, I am tracing my progress and growth in moving on from emotions that I had for a boy who did not share the same feelings. I was coping and healing. The habit of writing helped me move forward as well as release in that exact moment to prevent the thoughts from staying trapped inside me.

One of my poems “I Judge Myself” was originally written by audio recording. In a moment of mental rest after dropping off a friend at her house, I used my phone to record myself verbally writing a poem on my drive home. The feelings of inadequacy and failed attempts at perfection within in that poem came quickly and came on strong and I instantly wanted to release and compartmentalize those feeling through my habit of poetry writing. My writing habits were more extensive than most of my students’ will be, however my students may find other creative urges that help them express their thoughts and emotions.

**TIP #6 for Writing for Well-being:** Write regularly. Create a habit or routine.

Nicoletta Demetriou in her previously mentioned TEDx Talk uses a daily practice of writing. She suggests writing for fifteen minutes each day which she does directly after waking up in the morning and before leaving her bed to start the day (2015). Writing during this time when you are half asleep allows you to get in touch with your thinking. This further works toward the writing that allows us to better understand ourselves as mentioned previously. Demetriou emphasizes the importance of repetition. Repetition is vital, but a daily fifteen minutes is not the only method. Doing similar writing regularly helps us make small gradual improvements in coping, healing, growing, and/or thinking.

Dialogue journals as one routine form of writing have been used to help students improve in emotional regulation. Used in a study with students with emotional and behavioral disturbances, “Dialogue journals are a responsive form of writing in which students and teachers carry on a conversation over time, sharing ideas, feelings, and concerns in writing (Staton, 1987). This provides opportunities for both social development and academic learning” (Regan,



Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2005). This form of writing combines the principles of talk therapy with the practice of self-reflection. The key here is that dialogue journals are a routine. When working to form coping skills, especially for these students with identified difficulty in emotional and behavioral skills, it is not something that can be done in a day. The continued practice with writing and dialogue can grow these skills slowly and be ready for inevitable setbacks. Dialogue journal intervention has shown a connection to students improving both writing and a target behavioral goal (Regan, Mastropieri, & Scruggs, 2005). It should be noted that the use of dialogue journals may not be necessary for all students though the practice could likely help any student. This practice appears to be quite time intensive for the teacher, but similar practices can be done without the same level of teacher feedback.

The practice of writing as well as the use of revision can promote a growth mindset. Carol Dweck's growth mindset, as opposed to a fixed mindset, enables us to focus more on improvement and sustained effort. Writing that has a stagnant role might leave students in a mindset that they are either good or bad at writing or that expressing their emotions won't help them because it didn't help them in one sitting. The mindset that improvement comes from continual effort is important in the practice of well-being. Whether with writing or another tool for reflection and relaxation it is the practice of regular use that is most effective for well-being. It is a continuous consideration of your emotional state and reflective thinking that allows you to be focused on continual growth. Promoting this in your classroom can refer back to the idea that we need to have a common language of well-being in the classroom community.

Even as someone who loves to write, I often struggle to maintain any kind of routine. However, the classroom provides the affordance to build writing for well-being into the daily, weekly, and/or quarterly routine. Depending on the course you are teaching and the requirements

from your school or district, you may not be able to have daily journals or implement something like dialogue journals. Perhaps instead, you implement Friday free-writes for ten minutes or longer. Or even written reflections every two weeks to connect course content to students' lives. The practice of written reflection on both a personal and intellectual level is something I have been assigned constantly at the post-secondary level, but almost never before college.

You can also establish routines within however much class time you can commit to writing that tie into your general classroom management structure. In my previously mentioned creative writing class taught by Sarah Dennis, the class allowed for a large amount of freedom within a few constraints. The class' creative writing rules were as follows "1. Write every day, 2. Write in blue/black pen, 3. Line out, 4. Don't toss or tear out, 5. Take risks" (2016). Of course some rules or restrictions are simply for the sake of you, as the teacher, such as the rule to only use pens with blue or black ink. However, when writing so frequently there are a few things we should emphasize and specific rules and routines can help students work on these skills and ideas. The rule to write every day sets a clear expectation that lets students know they will need to find something to put on the page each day. This was an elective so myself as well as many of my peers enjoyed this opportunity and wanted to write every class. It became an enormous comfort to know I would have the chance to write in Ms. Dennis' classroom even when I couldn't find the time or energy to write outside of class.

The most contentious rules in my class were that we could only ever line out something we had written and that we were not allowed to rip pages from our notebooks. We were practicing the habit of writing which included a mindset of revision and learning from what we had once written. If we completely blacked out a sentence, we could not look back at that sentence to inform an edit we might make. This absence of a delete button is yet another reason

to favor writing by hand. I loved this rule. I have always very much enjoyed the ability to look back at old writing and immerse myself in how I felt uninhibited in that moment. A friend of mine in that class hated it. He will still sometimes throw away or permanently delete his writing even when he later regrets it. Now having taken this class, he has on occasion remembered Ms. Dennis' lesson and stopped the urge to press delete. When we do erase our work, we lose the importance of routine writing. Now he cannot reread what helped him heal in that moment. He cannot use that to promote a growth mindset. Writing helps us better understand ourselves and regular as well as kept writing allows us to see our growth and better learn from our mistakes. By mistakes I am referring to those we make in writing, but more so mistakes we make in our lives.

It has been thoroughly established that I wrote often during my adolescence. I also often wrote about the same things. I wrote about the same boy or similar situations with a new boy. I wrote about the stress of waiting for the cast list to be posted. I wrote about feeling alone and unwanted. I wrote two poems about the same boy (we'll call him Luke) and the same heart-wrenching way he treated me in two very similar poems called "Bad Habit" and "Habitual." Both poems acknowledge that my close friendship with Luke was a bad habit. In "Bad Habit," I have several lines that cause me to cringe now such as "Girls are not like Pokémon stop trying to catch them all," but I am writing from a place of frustration and pain to move toward a place where I remind myself that I matter. When I wrote the words "I'm breaking my bad habit" and "And no, I'm not okay/ And yes, it is your fault" I believed that I would improve the situation. A few weeks later, I wrote "Habitual" in which I said "The worst part about habits is that they are habitual/ And this ones become like a ritual" where I once again acknowledge that I am harping on the same problem: "I've found myself once again reaching for relief."

I still have these poems. I never deleted them and yes, I hate reading them. It is infuriating to see myself in pain from a superficial and very fixable problem. It may seem discouraging to see in writing that the first poem didn't stop the need for a second. However, the act of writing through this ongoing and complex relationship that was incredibly important to the teenage-me who wrote it is still progress and still a gateway to well-being. These poems helped me release my emotions and keeping those poems and continuing to write about this conflict in my journals reminded me that I mattered in this equation. I was seventeen and I needed the good habit of writing about my bad habits to build a pattern of thinking about how I felt and how I could improve the factors on my well-being.

Several months later, I wrote a final poem about this particular boy, Luke. It was not titled, but the repeated word throughout is remember. I am grappling with the friendship that was still intact with Luke. My now older, and supposedly wiser, self can be frustrated that I never cut ties completely. My past-self wrote "I remember everything and I'm still trying to figure out if it'd be better to forget" as I repeated the routine of writing while working through the complexities of this friendship. The important thing in these and other writing about this ongoing crush is that the repeated writing helped me catch myself when I thinking or acting in a way that went against what my writing also reminded me that I actually deserved. I ended the poem imagining what I might say to him:

Remember how you could never be mine,

remember how you broke my heart,

remember how many times?

Remember, now and forever that it is too late.

I know I'm trying to never forget.

Routine writing and keeping that writing helps us remember what we already taught ourselves before. The time with you and the page is time to hear your voice more clearly—to grow.

Before my adolescence was over, it was peppered with financial concerns, academic pressures, the loss of family members, as well as the romantic drama. The issues of different teens will vary and some seemingly unimportant or naïve struggles may need routine attention as they are excruciatingly important to some adolescents. Dedicating routine times for students to write through these outside factors will help them build coping skills as well as grow as writers and thinkers. I find journaling to be a notably important form of writing to repeat regularly while working toward well-being as human beings and intellectual thinkers. We want our students to improve both as people and as scholars. That goal is worthy of routine class time.

**Ch. 5: Writing to Share**

Writing, especially with the intent to better your mental health, is usually a very private endeavor. To work through difficult emotions, we have to write difficult things that are usually quite personal and revealing. However, there can be value in sharing the work that is created. For example, I wrote the poem below, “Sorry” at first for myself. Much of the references are unclear unless you are me or a close friend of mine. Even within the second line I use my mother’s maiden name D’Onofrio in a way that might be confusing to some readers or listeners. However, I decided to select this poem to share with my creative writing class because it felt important for me to share with others.

*Sorry (January 27, 2016)*

“I’m sorry”  
It’s one of those D’Onofrio curses,  
So consequently, I got it from my mom.  
I’ll apologize for anything and obnoxiously for everything.  
I’m sorry for apologizing for apologizing.  
I’m sorry for apologizing for apologizing about apologizing.  
Oh gosh!  
I’m sorry, I’ll stop.  
You know what I’m sorry,  
But you are just going to have to listen.  
I’m sorry for the poems I’m too lazy to finish.  
I’m sorry for the sarcastic comment that came off a bit too bitter.  
I’m sorry for my cruel, inhumane jokes.  
I’m sorry that I cry at movies.  
I’m sorry I often struggle to love myself.  
I’m sorry, I just stepped on your foot.  
I’m sorry that someday I have to follow every step exactly.  
I’m sorry for tripping over my own words.  
I’m sorry for falling in love with all the wrong people.  
I’m sorry for comparing my GPA like it’s a sport.  
I’m sorry that I’m not sorry I said that,  
Because it was funny and she only cared a little.  
I’m sorry for making every lawn chair straight,  
But leaving my room a pig sty.  
I’m sorry for my mood swings.  
I’m sorry I have no idea where I’m going,

But a sense of direction doesn't go on my resume.  
I'm sorry that second place made me cry.  
I'm sorry that I make everything a competition.  
I'm sorry that I can't even win against myself.  
I'm sorry for making you listen to the word sorry so many times.  
I'm sorry I don't fit in your boxes.  
I'm sorry that people think I'm good enough.  
I'm sorry that the only person who doesn't think I'm working hard enough,  
Who thinks my success is just luck,  
Who never thinks "I'm sorry" is never enough  
Because I'm not enough  
Is me.  
I am so sorry.  
I'm still trying to forgive myself for being me.

Educators' views on the role of sharing personal creative writing in the classroom is mixed. Some say that if personal writing is to be shared in the classroom there should be little to no feedback or comment given to the writer. Others champion the use of constructive feedback in a workshop setting. I personally enjoyed sharing this poem as the writer because it helped me to release some of these difficult emotions from being stuck in my mind and etched onto the page. I shared this poem as part of a "Read-Around" in Sarah Dennis' class. It was very validating to share this and to know that others felt similar ways. The process for "Read-Arounds" was focused on the act of sharing and appreciating our work rather than critiquing and revising. We each went around and shared our writing, mostly poetry in this class, and as we listened to our peers, we were asked to write down lines or phrases that stood out to us. We needed to write at least one moment from each peer's work. After everyone had shared, we took a few minutes in our circle to repeat some of these lines to the class. There was no specific order to sharing the lines we wrote, but instead a natural in and out of different voices with fragments of our peers' work. Hearing one of my lines said by a peer or our teacher was a very calm and

low stress way to be complimented and validated in my writing as well as the experiences that I was writing about.

**TIP #7 to Write for Well-Being:** Embrace opportunities to share your work.

This method of sharing is one I would love to implement into my own classroom. These were very therapeutic class days. I could not only further release my inner struggles and work through them, but I could identify with and acknowledge the experiences of my peers. While we were writing very different poems, we were experiencing our own struggles and shared struggles as well as exploring fictitious characters and writing techniques. I want to include some examples of the lines I wrote during our “Read-Alouds” in class. While you read these, try to imagine a class of teens circled around rereading these fragments of more complex writings. The experience can be similar to that of a kind of meditation.

“I’m just the little girl who crawls into her parents’ bed”

“She is only second behind himself”

“Bring out the best of me and make me want to see the rest of me”

“I’m over it– and you”

“We bleed rivers dry and I feel as if it was my own veins”

“When he left, she wore matching socks for a week”

“Hunch over my own writing”

“How do you rid yourself of something that made you live?”

“I gave you time and you wanted eternity”

“Shines dim on high”



“My parents work more jobs than they can count”

“Wally was in wove”

“Wally walked out of Walmart”

“If the bar doesn’t crush me, my responsibilities do, and if they don’t, I will”

“Of course I throw like a girl, I am one”

“A procrastinating mind-made psychopath”

“If I had \$1 for every time I made myself laugh, I could help Bernie Sanders”

“Every day I commit suicide. The bullets are just overdue.”

“The words I write aren’t the words I speak”

I wish I could credit my peers with their words, but I can’t. I don’t remember who wrote these lines and I couldn’t tell you what the poems were about. I don’t even remember which lines were written by my best friend. It doesn’t matter. In these moments, I wrote down specific lines. My notebook pages are not the same as anyone else’s. We connected to different pieces and heard the poems in different ways. I love this activity because it is both personal and individualistic as well as public and shared.

When writing with a group or class, sharing is an “integral part of the group process, in that it allows for an appreciation of the work achieved” (Philips, Linington, Penman, 1999). The process of writing can be tedious and intimidating especially when writing about difficult topics, it is important to take time for appreciation. These moments for sharing also work well to end a class period, unit, or assignment. Additionally, the sharing of meaningful writing can open up a gateway to talking about struggles. When hearing what others have written, it is likely for students to recognize that they are not alone in their difficulties. They might find a peer who has

experienced similar struggles or simply find comfort in knowing that everyone has things they need to work through.

I personally thrived on the sharing of my writing and still do. Most of the poetry I wrote in high school was written as spoken word poetry that was intended to be performed. I was a member of my high school's spoken word poetry club and attended events hosted by a local spoken word group. (The

picture to the right is me reading a poem at one of these events

in high school.) The art of performance is a different animal

than writing for the page. I was drawn to performed poetry

because it allowed me to connect my love for writing and my

love for theatre. I also found a lot of enjoyment watching the

very prevalent spoken word poem videos on YouTube in my free time. Facilitating opportunities

for public performance may be more overwhelming than helpful for some students and may be

more trouble than it's worth depending on your goals. For me, going to the school club or the

local coffee shop was a way to release my demons and assert my beliefs through my poetry. I

didn't mind the compliments and positive reinforcement that came with these welcoming

communities either.

I have also found great value in performing poetry on a larger scale. One poem in particular I have felt an urge to share. This poem is below and it tackles my difficulty with body

image throughout adolescence. The act of writing it was helpful and healing, but the act of

sharing it felt important and necessary. I still have the words of this poem committed to memory

as it is still a crucial part of my identity and I have performed it on multiple occasions. "They

Never Say Slim" was performed at my high school's talent show my senior year as well as at a



talent show at my university. The video of my performance at the high school talent show is still available on YouTube (2016 Last Hawk Standing: Erin Goff

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mvnxXMpdeqs>).

They Never Say Slim (2015)

They never say slim  
Or even thin  
They only ever say skinny  
And contrary to popular belief, the word skinny does not sound pretty  
Don't forget that the tiny little wrists you always seem to notice are easier to break  
And the boney ankles easier to twist  
Every jagged edge of my body  
Rigid shoulders, carved collarbone and sharp hips  
Are trying to claw their way out  
An acute reminder that they are not  
My bones are not  
I am not comfortable in my own skin  
You can feel every curve of my spine  
Because I'm still trying to find my backbone  
Why is thin this so called "skinny"  
When some days I barely have thick enough skin to handle the piercing of the word  
But I can't be insecure can I  
I can't be unhappy can I  
I have to love this waistline don't I  
I have to love my 4 ½ ring size don't I  
I have to love my thigh gap don't I  
I have to burst with pride when I hear the word skinny don't I  
I have to thank god every day for  
My skinny ankles  
My skinny legs  
My skinny hips  
My skinny waist  
My skinny stomach  
My skinny arms  
My skinny wrists  
My skinny fingers  
My skinny everything  
Don't I?  
I have to love that my bracelets don't fit, don't I  
I have love that my jeans are too big but too short, don't I  
All I have to do is eat a cheeseburger, right?  
Put a little meat on my bones  
Eat another plate when I said I'm full, right?

Because god forbid the skinny girl is self-conscious  
God forbid the skinny girl eats the whole bag of Oreos  
Or takes that second piece of cake  
God forbid the skinny girl can't find the right fit  
God forbid the skinny girl has a metabolism she can't control  
Like you can't control yours  
You can't call the thicker girl fat  
But go right ahead and call the skinny girl skin and bones  
Go right ahead call her anorexic  
Please go right ahead call her bulimic  
She won't take it personally just look how blessed she is  
How could 5'8 and 115 not feel right?  
How could I ever feel like a waste of space when I barely take up any?  
What more could I want than to look in the mirror and see a skeleton looking back?  
But I'm a skinny girl  
So I just have to keep my skinny mouth shut, don't I?

At both talent shows, I had people telling me that my words were moving and meaningful to them or to someone they love. As a high school senior, it was terrifying to go in front of an audience of my peers and unapologetically share something so personal. I was no stranger to performance and had performed on that very stage over a dozen times, but I was performing as myself for the first time on that familiar stage. I remember the panic I felt as my leg began to shake uncontrollability in high heels that I wasn't used to wearing. I would never force every child in my classroom to perform in such a public setting, but I do believe that every child could and honestly should share something they love and are proud of creating in a some kind of public setting. I didn't win my school talent show, but I told my story and discovered it wasn't mine alone. After the show, I had a few of my friends, peers, and teachers compliment and congratulate me. I also had a few strangers approach me. I remember a grown woman telling me that she felt exactly how I felt and was so happy to hear someone say it. She told me about the names she was called as a teenager that weren't always intended to be hurtful, but nonetheless had stayed with her all these years. Yes, the practice of performing helped me gain skills in public speaking, composure, writing, and critical thinking, but I learned a lot more about myself

too. I learned that I was capable of more than I thought I was. I learned that my words and my story have power. Performing on a larger scale taught me that not only were my experiences as a teen reflected in my peers, but they were felt by women long since high school graduated that I had never met. I was not alone in my pain and that made me feel better as well as feel a call to keep spreading my story on behalf of those who had stayed quiet so long.

At this point, I want to take a step back and acknowledge that the vast majority of teenagers don't fall in love with writing, performing, and publicly baring their soul like I happened to. That's okay and actually probably a good thing. The authors of *Brave New Voices: The YOUTH SPEAKS Guide to Teaching Spoken Word Poetry* remind teachers that it is normal to receive resistance from students, especially if there is an expectation for regular sharing or performing of writing. By the nature of teaching, we often have classrooms that contain more students who don't enjoy our content area than do. I have used a lot of research from therapists and psychologists to support the benefit of writing for therapeutic meanings, however our classrooms are a different environment. *Writing Well: Creative Writing and Mental Health* for example is focused on small group therapy through creative writing. They say six to eight people in these groups is ideal and that "Not everyone is suitable for a group of this kind – those who find extreme difficulty in concentrating or who have language or literacy problems will be frustrated and could be humiliated by the experience of the group" (Philips, Linington, Penman, 1999). These ideas are not wrong, but they are not realistic in the educational classroom setting. We will have students who cannot focus or have literacy problems in our classrooms of far more than eight children. We have to do our best to differentiate and scaffold so students can improve their reading and writing skills while also finding tools for coping and ultimately a goal of well-

being. The process of building a community becomes even more essential in classes where students have not chosen to be there.

When we want writing to be an accessible and healthy practice of expression, we need to form classroom environments that are welcoming and noncompetitive. In literature new and old regarding writing in the classroom or in therapy, the term “safe space” comes up often. The idea of creating a safe space for all students isn’t new for educators. We can debate the benefits and drawbacks of this mindset for a classroom environment, but when we ask students to tackle complex and emotional issues in our classrooms we must acknowledge the importance that the child feels safe in doing this. If you’re a seasoned teacher, you likely already have methods you like to use to build rapport with your students and establish a classroom environment. These may be different when creating a unit or course that demands vulnerable and critical writing that will be shared in the classroom.

Jen Weiss and Scott Herndon in *Brave New Voices* provide advice and guidelines for a classroom that is going to teach specifically spoken word poetry. I will list their guidelines for reference though I am not sure they are all realistic or ideal for many classrooms:

1. Reinvigorate the traditional classroom space.
2. Let workshops be student-driven.
3. Get rid of censorship.
4. Don’t use grades.
5. Find the good in students’ work and challenge them to make it better.
6. Make sure that all exercises are read aloud by every student.
7. Experiment.
8. Remember that great writing is a process, not a product.
9. Have some fun! (Weiss & Herndon, 2001).

Depending on your specific classroom environment, the suggestion to remove grades could be an effective method to encourage students to open up and take risks in their writing. Grading personal and creative work can often feel like placing a grade on the students’ experiences and if

you have the ability to remove this aspect of writing, it can make the environment more welcoming while still promoting growth and improvement. Many of these guidelines can be effective for all classrooms such as finding positives in students' work and encouraging them to improve their work as well as experimentation and having fun.

Weiss and Herndon suggest that every student should share their writing for each exercise. This is a place where we need to think critically about the role of sharing writing in the classroom. I understand the benefit of students sharing every exercise response may be to ensure that the class is not dominated by the same few volunteers. It also allows the class to support each other in the process of writing rather than only through polished products. It makes sense specifically when teaching spoken word poetry as it creates an atmosphere that prepares students to confidently perform their work. However, I think this level of sharing can be a bit unrealistic. Only a strictly writing class would have the class time for students to share after every exercise and even then writing classes may not have that kind of time available. A clear expectation for every student to share their responses to an exercise may also limit a student's writing. They may not take the same risks or explore the same depth in their thinking and writing if they know it will be shared that very same day. The common practice of sharing can help build rapport between the teacher and students as well as the students to each other, but it may be too time-consuming for daily use and could prevent students from using class to work through personal issues that they may not want to share. Sharing writing of any kind (notably personal or not) can benefit students in confidence and habit-forming, but as always in education, time is precious so we must balance the benefit.

Before asking students to share writing that is personal or unfinished, we must work to establish a positive classroom community or safe space. To establish a safe space in their Young

Voices Rise poetry group, Mark and Gabriel lay out three rules during workshops: “(1) Be brave, (2) Be respectful, (3) your voice matters” (Williams, 2015). These are the simple rules they established with students to promote an environment that is welcoming, encouraging, and empowering. Some community and safe space building comes from direct instruction such as outlining rules, while continuing this environment requires positive language and upholding of these rules. I think respect is an essential aspect of a community that will be productive for writing for well-being when that writing is going to be shared. Your students may not all like each other or you, but they need to respect each other enough so that every child feels welcome to share the very personal process of writing.

If you do use sharing to the whole class or to pairs/groups, then this sharing lends toward the presence of revision. Revision from an academic standpoint is important for students to grow as writers and thinkers. Revised work allows for more confidence when sharing work which can be an important release or conversation starter. Rereading and revising writing continues the practice of reflection and the growth mindset that lends to an attitude of ever-changing improvement rather than stagnancy. Workshopping can allow students to share their work as well as give each other feedback that can help them grow as writers and become more resilient. In “Rewriting Struggles as Strength: Young Adults’ Reflections on the Significance of Their High School Poetry Community,” Logan Manning talks about how workshops were remembered fondly by many prior students in a high school poetry class. Manning recounts one of the former students experience:

Jaleeyah sought in-school spaces to work through the obstacles she faced in other realms of her life. She remembered the poetry class as a space to write through her struggles.

The medium of poetry gave her distance that allowed her to discuss hard topics and to get



feedback in a less direct way because the conversation centered around the poem, not the person. (Manning, 2016).

Jaleeyah's experiences support much of the other concepts we have discussed as she was able to work through outside struggles and give her the distance she needed to do this. She was also able to share her personal work because of how the class conducted workshops and feedback focused on her work rather than herself. With the mindset that feedback helps us work through an event and improve a piece of writing rather than find fault within ourselves, it can be a helpful and meaningful process without making students dread sharing their work. However, it is also important to remember that part of well-being is building resilience as Laura Bean attempts with her students and some constructive feedback can help students build those skills of resilience.

**TIP #8 for Writing for Well-Being:** Revise some work to better share your ideas, thoughts, and experiences with others.

When revising work to be performed, read, or submitted to the teacher, there are several methods to improve writing. Workshops with verbal feedback can help as it did for Jaleeyah while also bringing students together. More structured revision activities and peer-review may also have a place. One revision exercise from Weiss and Herndon that I find notably interesting is called "Find the Hole in the Dream" (Weiss & Herndon, 2001). This exercise works with the idea that poetry, or I would argue any writing or art, can be like a dream that allows us to suspend disbelief. Students in this exercise read their work in small groups and their peers mark the moments they feel like the dream has a hole or a break. At the heart of this exercise, poetry is seen as a dream shared from the poet to the reader and through revision we can make this

moment of magic from reading the work be more clear and connected for the readers or listeners. Allowing students to share their writing and encouraging revision promotes the idea that writing is a chance to express your emotions, ideas, and experiences— to tell your story— and writing to share is acknowledging that their work is worth hearing.

### Conclusion

The practice of writing— of expression— can transform, calm, and heal us. As I bring my thoughts to a close, I would like to consider the potential of writing for well-being and acknowledge some drawbacks. Logan Manning, after studying the impact of a high school poetry community, argues that “especially in the face of increased standardization in US schools, poetry can provide a space for youth to foster relationships through learning that can enable them to transform their struggles into strength and to develop as citizens who see themselves in a positive light” (Manning, 2016). The space to write and be supported by a classroom community can make students stronger writers and people as they move through life during and after the course. Writing for well-being practices and attitudes in classrooms can give students the tools to work through difficulties in their life in addition to intellectual difficulties.

Throughout my life, writing has protected, nurtured, and sometimes saved me. I do believe that writing can achieve almost countless goals when we expand our minds and engage our students. However, we must avoid expectation of miracles when implementing writing for well-being as any other strategy in teaching to avoid burning out. Not every student will create stellar writing. Not every student will learn to cope. Not every student will heal and grow. I know that writing helped me and that scientists, researchers, and teachers believe in the power of writing. In the spirit of writing for well-being, let the methods and tactics ever-change but consider the tips and resources discussed as well as my experience to help make adolescence more cognizant of how expression can heal us.

### Tips for Writing for Well-Being

1. When you're feeling overwhelmed and need immediate relief, try writing it down.

Writing for immediate release can help ease acute negative emotions and stop spiraling thoughts. While students will not often have their moment of being overwhelmed in class, try creating a language and mindset in class that promotes expression (written or otherwise) as a coping mechanism.

2. Foster a mindset and environment to move *through* your emotions and experiences rather than move *around* them.

Opening your classroom for discussion of emotions and experiences fosters this mindset to work through rather than around. Adolescence is a difficult period of time and our students, like ourselves, are tempted to take the easy way around their emotions, but we want to help build positive coping mechanisms for more successful adult well-being.

3. Whenever possible, write by hand in a simple notebook.

Writing by hand is shown to improve memory and many writers tote its benefit in creativity. Writing by hand also reduces students' ability to erase/delete the work that is a part of their growth as writers and people. Use writing by hand especially for initial creative work. Use plain notebooks to eliminate the need to write finished work in a more elegant notebook.

4. Write to know what you think and who you are.

Writing, especially free-writing, is a gateway to better understanding ourselves and our thinking. We can use writing to help uncover our true voices that we usually hide away. This can be an intimidating process, so ease students in. Try using the Lectio Divina structure to find deeper layers of thought. Use writing prompts like writing a list of 100 things you love to tap into gut reactions and thoughts.

5. Use a variety of writing mediums. Find what you like and what works best in certain situations.

A variety of writing forms and genres have research and theory to support their use. Think about assigning or giving options to write in these varieties: journaling, poetry, narrative/story, drama, and comics (there are many more I did not discuss). Remember that students have different preferences and talents that could benefit from choice in writing. However, challenging our writing patterns can uncover new ideas. Use established forms or prompts to encourage a variety of writing styles.

6. Write regularly. Create a habit or routine.

Ideally, we want students to carry what they learn with them when they leave our classrooms. Providing regular and routine writing can promote a lasting habit. Writing and well-being are both on-going processes and so writing for well-being cannot be done in one go. Find a way to add a writing routine into your class whether it is daily, weekly, or even quarterly.

7. Embrace opportunities to share your work.

Sharing creative work, especially about personal experiences, can be an additional step in the healing process toward sustaining well-being. I have found a great release and freedom from letting my words be shared. Allowing small group, class, or even public sharing, with or without constructive feedback, can help students appreciate their progress and connect with students who may have similar experiences.

8. Revise some work to better share your ideas, thoughts, and experiences with others.

Revision is essential on an academic level to create students' best work. The process of revision can also allow students to better connect their thoughts and experiences to readers. When we create opportunities for revision and peer feedback, students can continue to work through any emotional connection to their work and enhance their

writing skills. This can be done with verbal feedback in workshops or written feedback.

Revisit the activity “Find the Hole in the Dream” for a unique revision activity.

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*What It Is* is an artistic book to guide readers through the writing process. It is perfect for helping engage students and work with memories.

Philips, D., Linington, L., Penman, D. (1999) *Writing Well: Creative Writing and Mental Health*. England, UK: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

This research-based book provides guidance, suggestions, and activities for a creative writing therapy group that could be used or modified for the classroom.

Weiss, J., Herndon, S. (2001). *Brave New Voices: The YOUTH SPEAKS Guide to Teaching Spoken Word Poetry*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann.

*Brave New Voices* outlines detailed suggestions and procedures to implement spoken word poetry instruction into the classroom.

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In this book, Susan Zimmermann reflects on personal experiences as she provides advice and specific exercises to work through grief using writing.

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[https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how\\_creative\\_writing\\_can\\_increase\\_students\\_resilience](https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_creative_writing_can_increase_students_resilience)

Laura Bean outlines how she implemented writing in her classroom to build resilience and found data to support growth in self-compassion and reading/writing ability.

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Saunders reflects on using poetry with children, adolescents, and adults with student examples and some exercise suggestions.

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the use of dialogue journals or see the measurable results they found.

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i “Notebook”

Going through routine and poetry starts bleeding out.  
My lips start moving, because my hands can't write it down  
And where is my notebook?  
What do you do when the words start flowing  
And you can't get them down and you know you'll  
Never see them again.  
Where is my notebook?  
What do you do when there's two  
Poems running about and you don't have a single page  
To let the screams out.  
Where is my notebook?  
Digging through an avalanche of clothes,  
Or stories untold,  
Of stains I never scrubbed out.  
Where is my notebook?  
Why is my room never clean  
When my thoughts become clear  
And I know just what to  
Say but there are no pages near.  
Where is my notebook?  
What happens to my words that don't kiss the page?  
That only caress my own ear.  
That linger in my thoughts when I  
Can't muster them back up  
Where is my notebook?  
I just want my net to catch  
My stray thoughts.  
I just want my parachute to  
Save me from the rocks.  
I just want a sail to harness my wind.  
I just want my pen to find beauty in my sin.  
Where is my goddamn notebook?