

CHAPTER 19

THE SECRETS OF EXPRESSIVE WRITING

BY NATHAN OHREN

The single most-important innovation in all of human history waits willingly at our fingertips.

Writing down our thoughts – putting abstract ideas into a concrete form so they can be understood, even if only for ourselves – is responsible for nearly all other human accomplishments. Because of this ability, great cities are planned and constructed, as are the highways that connect them. Thanks to this innovation, we raised machines, and evolved them into space-age computers, which now effortlessly and repeatedly perform tasks that were once considered miraculous. The universe is explorable. Justice is achievable. Every advance in medicine, and every Nobel Prize has been awarded thanks to this ability to preserve our thinking.

No other animal can trap its thoughts into such tidy packages and transmit them across space and time, maintaining their integrity, without distortion, dilution or the delusions of our memory and oral traditions. Writing allows collaboration with others, seen and unseen, and even with future versions of ourselves. Because of writing, our ideas, like building blocks, can be joined, organized, and refined to construct new realms of possibility. Thanks to writing, we enjoy the results of centuries of accumulated knowledge and wisdom, exponentially expanding the limits of what's possible in each generation.

EXPRESSIVE WRITING HAS UNIQUE POWER

There is a sacred category of writing, a surprisingly under-utilized conduit for personal growth, which has somehow remained a tightly-held secret. Known as *expressive writing* (also commonly called reflective writing, or journaling), it is the practice of writing down one's private thoughts and feelings for no other audience than one's self.

Many who invest time in expressive writing consider it a spiritual practice, because it fosters safe space in the psyche for honest self-examination. It allows for:

- (Re)discovering one's passions and creativity.
- Repairing relationships.
- Deepening compassion for one's self and others.
- Gaining clarity on troubling issues.
- Focusing on professional accomplishments and career growth.
- Connecting with one's life purpose.

Expressive writing has also proved to contribute positively to one's physical health. Done correctly, expressive writing is not difficult. It does not take a lot of time. And yet it unlocks grand hallways to greater joy and productivity in every area of life.

Ironically, we learn the mechanics of writing in childhood, yet rarely utilize its full power. We put more emphasis on obeying rules of punctuation and grammar, and overlook the magic of examining our own thinking. It is like owning Aladdin's Lamp, never realizing that a Genie yearns to be summoned.

Writing for personal growth is vastly different from merely thinking or talking about it. Anyone who meditates knows that thoughts are like shifting sands of a beach, pushed by the waves of our moods, and the tides of circumstance. Have you ever been in a conversation, and found yourself saying, "No, I didn't say that," or "I might have said that, but I didn't mean it"? And then there's the subtle interference of the thoughts we have of the person with whom we are speaking, which we rarely admit, and barely notice.

Writing promotes clarity, and forces specificity. Pressing our solitary thoughts onto paper allows us to pinpoint and harvest valuable raw material from the heavenly fields of dreams, and ground them, into concrete milestones of our journey. More than just playing within the whims and fancies of our mind, writing empowers us to relate to ideas as solid objects, and transform even the silliest notions into powerful words, goals, and action steps. Interestingly, in Hebrew, the word for “word” (*millah*) is exactly the same as the word for “thing.” This underscores an ancient notion that our ideas become manifest by pinning them down with words.

Therefore, writing enables an individual to grasp genuine substance from the flowing river of thought, and not merely bask in the glow of potential enlightenment, which dissipates all too soon. (There’s no wonder why New Year Resolutions get forgotten by February.) Writing puts handles on our thoughts, so we can use them to build mental lighthouses that attract more thoughts, directing them into safe harbor, where the precious cargo of self-awareness and self-mastery can be readily unloaded.

The awareness of one’s thoughts is the first step to redirecting them. To master our thoughts is the ultimate solution to conquering fears, changing behavior, overcoming addictions, and programming ourselves for success in every way. We overlook that writing is the ideal circuit for harnessing the intellectual currents that flow through our minds.

The incredible power of expressive writing has been mistakenly camouflaged by the innocent accusations of uneducated naysayers. Some of them claim that spending time on such writing is selfish, wasteful, unproductive, lazy, or useless. The stories which follow are a few examples which call out a thundering difference between selfishness and cultivating opportunities that benefit a person’s emotional, psychological and professional interests.

Pursuing what is beneficial to one’s interests leads to new developments and accomplishments, which in turn benefit everyone. Furthermore, expressive writing helps develop the kind of personal awareness and responsibility that makes it possible for people to make better choices. It promotes the acquisition of much-needed life skills. It empowers the mind, and strengthens the soul.

There are several forms of expressive writing: from list-making to letter-writing, and may include doodling and other artistic expressions. Their common thread is summarized by a quote from Dr. James Pennebaker, President of the Society for Personality and Social Psychology, recipient of the Distinguished Scholar Award for his ground breaking discoveries. “When individuals write about emotional experiences, significant physical and mental health improvements follow.”

In 2004, Dr. Pennebaker published the results of scientific and paradigm-changing studies, which produced an unprecedented body of evidence for the power of expressive writing to heal the physical body. Pennebaker showed that expressive writing boosts the immune system, promotes healing of wounds, improves lung and liver functions, and reduces common symptoms of disease and illness. As a result, doctors and therapists now prescribe journal writing as a respectable component of treatment for many types of medical and psychological ailments.

Pennebaker provided empirical support for what journal writers have always known. Some of the world’s greatest entrepreneurs, doctors, teachers, scientists, artists, coaches, psychologists, educators, therapists, and leaders in every field of endeavor have credited private journaling as a factor in their health, relationships, financial success, and career accomplishments.

REAL LIFE EXAMPLES

Below are true-story examples from real people whom I have either personally helped, or interviewed on my weekly Internet podcast, *JournalTalk*.

- Mari first began keeping a journal as a form of physical therapy so she could regain control of her right hand, which had deteriorated due to multiple sclerosis. She was able to reverse the symptoms of this condition by writing three pages every morning. In addition to the physical benefits of this practice, her mind and memory also improved because of her newly-cultivated abilities to notice and nurture the many concepts that streamed from her subconscious mind.
- A nine-year-old girl named Addison had been keeping a private journal for several months. One evening she lost her temper, saying some unfavorable things to her brother. Addison was sent

to her room, where, without request or instruction, she wrote in her journal to process the experience. When she emerged from her bedroom an hour later, she carried two letters. The first, an apology to her brother, explaining that she only said what she did in order to get his attention. The second letter, written to mommy, apologized for lying about the incident, and expressed her desire to come back into her good graces. Her mother read these letters with amazement and gratitude.

- Christopher was a hard-working account manager, who treated clients expertly, and was intimately familiar with the company's systems and processes. In a short time, he was promoted to management, overseeing a team of other account managers. It seemed by all standards that he was enjoying a prosperous career. But Christopher felt pushed into a role for which he was unprepared, with no training or guidance, and was now expected to resolve really tough issues. He silently suffered, daily questioning his confidence, embarrassed to ask for help, and always under pressure. He feared it was only time before he'd lose his job altogether. I gave Chris a series of daily writing prompts, which helped remind him of his value, track the effectiveness of his decisions, and communicate his ideas succinctly across the organization. Today, Christopher is a manager of managers, and successfully leading multiple teams using similar strategies.
- Shirley, a Jewish woman, age 65, was still plagued by fears of hellfire and damnation because of the harsh Christian beliefs impressed upon her from childhood by her surrogate parents. This anxiety became a major part of her life and caused her much pain and fear. A therapist advised her to write a journal entry in the form of a message to Jesus. The message expressed her deepest fears, confusion, and the need for understanding and acceptance. After a few days, Shirley followed the instinct to write another entry, this time as a response from Jesus. It conveyed only kindness, love, and appreciation. This therapeutic use of journal writing allowed Shirley to heal a deep spiritual bruise that had lasted decades, providing peace and comfort
- Donny and his wife Leslie spent months in angst about whether he should give up a successful career so they could relocate

nearer to their family. They had agonized over various options, and replayed pros and cons in excruciating detail. Donny seemed to flip-flop his decision every few days, trying to make his head and heart agree. All the while, Donny stifled to take action, in fear of making the wrong move. He agreed to my unusual writing assignment: to write out his thoughts and feelings from an alternative viewpoint – mentally projecting himself one year into the future, long after the decision was made – and writing as if looking back on today. After just a few pages, a huge weight was lifted. Donny could see clearly what they needed to do. His resignation letter was the next thing he wrote. Donny, Leslie and their families celebrated, and never look back with regret.

After reading these stories, you might be wondering what expressive writing could do for you, and how to get started.

HOW TO GET STARTED

Into which areas of your life are you ready to invite passion, clarity, and purpose?

- First, **don't over-think** the process. Let go of any rules about spelling or grammar, the length of your entries, or the tools you write with. The primary goal is simple: Express your truth. Every journal writer has their favorite formula, but forcing yourself to adopt someone else's method can backfire. Find a way that you enjoy so it can work for you long-term. Write about what is most important and relevant to you in the moment. The only rule about journaling is that *there's no wrong way to write*.
- **Writing prompts or simple questions** are a helpful nudge in a worthwhile direction. My favorite is, "What was the best part of my day?" Or, you might start by writing anything that comes to mind, and if nothing comes to mind, then write about that. If you experience writer's block, then write about your experience of writer's block.
- **Keeping the pen (or fingers) moving** will prevent you from getting "lost in thought". Using a five-minute timer and short sentences often keeps the process easy and simple, so it can become a consistent routine.

- **Be willing to explore yourself and question your assumptions.** It helps to begin each session with a moment of quiet reflection. Observe and document what you notice. As your journaling practice matures, you may learn more about how your thoughts and emotions originate, and become fascinated to note either their simplicity or complexity. *Journaling is mostly about noticing.* Keep this principle in mind, and your adventures will yield fruitful results.
- It's also a good idea to **finish an entry with brief statements of feedback**, answering such questions as: *What do I now notice having written that down? Or, How did it feel to write about this today? Or, What will I do with this information now?* Journal writing builds upon itself, as the actions you take today become a source for reflection tomorrow.
- **Being completely honest with yourself** generates the greatest discoveries. This doesn't mean being overly judgmental or harsh on yourself. If you have a strong inner critic, writing out its voice gives it a chance to be heard. And do the same for other aspects of yourself, your inner nurturer and inner child. Listen to the family of internal voices and write their tales.
- **Writing consistently** offers exponential benefits, but remember that *journaling is a process, not a product.* It's not how many pages you fill, but whether you are learning. There's no use for worry or guilt over periods you haven't written. There's no sense in "catching up." Rather just stay present.
- Lastly, it's good to **employ some creativity** to keep the process fresh and interesting. Sometimes it is enough to write down a few fun words that inspire you, or swap out your pen for a crayon, or scribe an imaginary conversation with a loved one. Anything is acceptable because no one is keeping score. As long as you are exploring and learning about yourself, you are nourishing the most valuable relationship possible. In the words of my high school counselor:

*When you become familiar with yourself,
you will know the whole world.*

~ Phyllis Molloff

CLOSING THOUGHTS

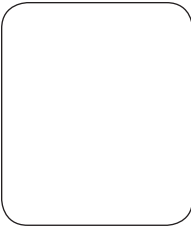
Some people worry that expressive writing might stir up old trauma from the past, or kick-start a downward spiral of anxiety. While this is less common, it is true that writing can make one's hopes and fears feel more tangible. There are a growing number of journal therapists who advocate a more structured approach to expressive writing, to waylay these fears, and still receive the many benefits discussed here. Most people find that with time, journaling helps them to develop strong internal resources to contain – even take advantage of – this effect, and deal with life's issues in an authentic and powerful way.

Journaling enthusiasts have come to appreciate its incredible paradoxes. For example, journaling is simultaneously a simple, straightforward exercise, as well as one that requires great courage and tenacity. Another, it seems equally important to record the most profound ponderings of your soul, as well as trivial aspects of your day. Also, some of the best insights and life-changing realizations from journaling happen when you least expect it.

Above all else, journaling promotes a profound “getting real” with one's self and with life. After all, true happiness is not found in shallow platitudes or optimistic clichés. Success on a soul level begins by seeing things clearly for what they are, and choosing a response with passion and purpose.

If I had to choose between happiness and clarity, I choose clarity.

~ Dennis Prager



About Nathan

Nathan Ohren offers a variety of workshops and focused coaching programs for personal and professional growth, using journal writing as a primary tool. His signature workshop, *Passion, Clarity and Purpose*, helps people get back in touch with the reasons they were born, and to move their lives in the direction of their dreams. He helps people mend important relationships, advance in their careers, and replace long-standing, confusing or frustrating issues with clarity and creation.

In June of 1985, Nathan Ohren had no idea what prompted him to pick up the pen and begin writing in a 200-page, 5-subject, spiral-bound notebook. His first entry began, “*Today was another boring day...*” Perhaps even at the age of fourteen, Nathan expected to invite passion and purpose into his young life.

As a troubled teenager fraught with suicidal thoughts, Nathan wrestled over issues of identity, and finding real truth. He filled his early volumes with pages of heart-felt prayers, meditations and responses to sacred texts. In one poignant entry during his coming of age, he wrote, “*The only thing I can know for sure is that I can’t know anything for sure; and I’m not even sure about that!*” Journal-writing itself had become Nathan’s spiritual path.

During the next 30 years of recording compelling stories of anguish and ambition, trials and triumphs, Nathan set his course on helping others to find passion, clarity and purpose through journal-writing.

After obtaining a B.S. in Business Administration from California State University at Northridge, Nathan served as a Crisis Hotline Counselor, Area Director for Toastmasters, and held a successful twelve-year career as Director of Client Services for a leading worldwide software company.

Meanwhile, he has become an eminent authority in the journal-writing community, as founder of Write4Life. He hosts and produces *JournalTalk*, a weekly podcast nominated for Best in Class at the Ninth Annual People’s Choice Podcasting Awards. Nathan manages operations and content at EasyJournaling.com, the world’s leading resource on digital journaling. He created the *30-Day Digital Journaling Challenge*, bringing together journaling therapists and application developers to help people investigate the opportunities of digital journaling.

In 2013, Nathan earned his Certified Journaling Instructor credentials from the Center for Journal Therapy. He is a requested guest speaker at numerous business and

journaling events. His book, *The Journal-Writer's Guide to Staying Started*, helps both new and experienced journal writers maximize the many benefits of journaling.

You may contact Nathan with any personal situation, large or small, to receive his suggestions for writing exercises that offer resolution, strength, or clarity. For a current list of available workshops, or to contact Nathan for a private consultation, please visit: www.write4life.com