

The Benefits of Writing

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It is likely that most adults do not give much thought to the writing that they do – in terms of the amount of text produced, quality of the written work, or the variety of writing tasks in which they engage. Typically, writing in everyday life tends to be performed for either the mundane tasks of personal and household management – shopping lists, phone messages, reminder notes to the kids – or for work-related tasks, such as inter-office memos, sales reports, and personnel evaluations (Brandt, 2001). Writing using a computer or smart phone is increasingly common with the spread of technology into all aspects of modern life, although there are generational and demographic differences in the practice of using a computer for writing. Cohen, White, and Cohen (2008), for example, found that younger, better educated, and employed US adults spent more time writing with computers, while older, less educated, and non-working persons spent more time writing using paper. While the variety of writing tasks adults engage in might be thought of as essential to work and home life, many everyday writing tasks probably contribute little to the overall quality of individuals' intellectual and emotional lives.

Of course, a significant number of adults engage in extensive and meaningful writing tasks. The most obvious examples are professional writers – journalists, book and short story authors, poets, and essayists, opinion columnists, college professors. The products of their work can be said to contribute to society in important ways: Inspiring and entertaining readers, reporting and analyzing significant political, cultural, and world events, critiquing government officials' actions, educating children, youth, and adults. Of course, one need not be a professional writer to obtain benefits from writing or to share what they know and think with others. Even some nonprofessional writers may be prolific, daily writers. Although extended letter writing is less common today, given the ease of text messaging and email for instant communication, some adults remain devoted and adept letter writers (Barton & Hamilton, 1998; Brandt, 2001). Barton and Hall (2000) claim that letter writing is among “the most pervasive of all literate activities” (p. 1), and letter writing can be seen as significant and consequential in people's lives, serving to maintain familial ties, communicate news and personal information, or resolve disputes. Aside from correspondence, some adults are committed diarists who regularly record their thoughts and observations on daily life. Still other adults may be casual writers who submit opinion letters to their daily newspaper, write for special interest periodicals (without any compensation other than the knowledge that they are a “published writer”), write an online blog for personal or special interest (“bloggers”), or who simply document family events – vacations, births, marriages and the like (Barton, Hamilton, & Ivanic, 1999).

The ubiquity of writing in everyday life raises the question of how – and how much -- writing contributes to individuals' intellectual and emotional development. Numerous studies have demonstrated the benefits of reading, but much less scholarly attention has been devoted to the personal outcomes that derive from writing. What advantages does writing afford to individuals? How does writing contribute to the development and maintenance of one's thinking abilities? And, how does writing contribute to emotional well being? I address these questions in the following research brief, drawing upon a handful of studies that have examined these issues.

Writing Can Help You Think

Linguist Walter Ong (1982) observed that writing is necessary to help the human mind achieve its full potential. Writing, for example, allows the writer to concretize abstract ideas and to “connect the dots in their knowledge,” according to the National Commission on Writing in America's Schools and Colleges (2003, p. 3). Particular kinds of writing tasks may, indeed, be beneficial to intellectual vitality, creativity, and thinking abilities. A study by Klein and Boals (2001) found, for example, that when adults write about significant life events their memory for such events is improved.



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Writing enables the external storage of information that can be represented symbolically (e.g., letters, numbers, words, formulas drawings) and which can then be analyzed, critiqued, reproduced, and transformed, among other potential actions (Donald, 1991; Menary, 2007). Writing might be beneficial to cognitive skills because it requires focusing of attention, planning and forethought, organization of one's thinking, and reflective thought, among other abilities – thereby sharpening these skills through practice and reinforcement. Readers interested in learning more about how writing contributes to intellectual and cognitive abilities are encouraged to read McArthur, Graham, and Fitzgerald (2006).

Writing Can Help You Feel Good

Somewhat more research has investigated the benefits of writing to emotional well being. James Pennebaker, a cognitive psychologist at the University of Texas-Austin has undertaken a series of investigations into the benefits of writing (Pennebaker, 2004), including its ability to heal emotional wounds. Short-term, focused writing can, according to Pennebaker, benefit anyone -- from persons who are dealing with terminal illness, victims of violent crime, or new college students struggling with the transition from high school. His approach is to give individuals a simple 20-minute writing assignment over four consecutive days: To write about their deepest emotions and thoughts about the upheaval that is most affecting their lives.

These brief expressive writing episodes have led participants to report feeling happier and less negative than prior to their writing experience, and having fewer symptoms of depression and anxiety, according to Pennebaker. Improvement in immune system functioning (Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glaser, & Glaser, 1988), fewer doctor visits (Pennebaker, Barger, & Tiebout, 1989), and greater academic performance (Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990), have been documented to result from brief expressive writing, among other positive outcomes. Further, such benefits yield regardless of age, according to Pennebaker and his colleagues.

There is also research demonstrating that writing leads to improvements in physical health. Smyth, Stone, Hurewitz, and Kaell (1999), for example, studied both asthmatic and arthritic patients who were assigned to write about either stressful events (treatment group) or emotionally neutral topics (control group). After four months, asthma patients in the treatment group showed improvements in lung function, but control group patients evidenced no change. Arthritic patients in the treatment group showed improvements in overall disease activity but controls did not change. The observed improvements were beyond those that could be attributed to the standard medical care that all participants received.

Summary

Writing is a significant literacy activity in modern life that enables individuals to accomplish a variety of personal, intellectual, occupational, and recreational goals. It has been demonstrated, across a variety of investigations, that writing activities yield a number of intellectual, physiological, and emotional benefits to individuals. These benefits include improve memory function, decreased symptomatology, and greater feelings of happiness.

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