

Research-based insights on wellbeing

Life narrative writing



An Introduction to Life Narrative Writing

A great deal of research has shown that writing in a structured way about stressful and traumatic experiences can help us overcome the negative effects of those experiences. Research shows that the practice of “life narrative reflections” or “expressive writing” can also lead to significant increases in our health and wellbeing. Keep in mind that there are probably many ways to write that may be beneficial to you. Think of this document as a set of guidelines to use and adapt in ways that provide the most benefit to you.

There are four phases or steps in the process we recommend. Take as long as you need in each phase. You might take only one day in each phase, but it is researchers find that many people find it most helpful to spend several days in each phase.

Try to write every day, or at least almost every day. Find a time and place where you won't be disturbed. Ideally, pick a time at the end of your workday. When you finish each day's writing, give yourself a break: do something relaxing or enjoyable, spend time with family or friends, engage in a contemplative or meditative practice—do something that restores you.

Begin by assuming you are writing only for yourself. Over time, you can decide whether or not you want to share anything you write with another person.

The Four Phases of Life Narrative Writing

Pouring
Out

Writing about what you experienced.

Stepping
Back

Exploring what you experienced.

Writing
a Story

Understanding what you experienced.

Imaging
Forward

Learning from what you experienced.

Phase One

Pouring Out

Begin Phase One by thinking about a stressful or traumatic event, something that happened to you that you would like to understand or process better. The event might have happened on one day, or it might have occurred over several days or a longer period of time.

Write about this event for at least 20 minutes, but take as long as you need. Try to write continuously, with little or no interruptions, during each session. When you write, really express your thoughts, and feelings—pour out what you experienced, focus especially on your feelings and emotions. Don't hold back or censor yourself. Your goal is to let yourself write fully about what you experienced, especially about your feelings and your thoughts. For now, write only for yourself so you can be totally honest and candid.

Be sure to give yourself enough time to really express yourself. It is fine to write over several days to go over the event or period of time get out all of the important experiences. When you run out of things to write, stop. Be watchful as well if you begin writing the same thing over and over: it is important to avoid repeating the same things too many times.

Research shows that negative feelings and emotions need to be acknowledged and understood, but we should avoid dwelling on them. The goal in this phase is to acknowledge the negative feelings emotions: in Phase Two and Phase Three you will work toward understanding them.

Phase Two

Stepping Back

In Phase Two, begin your writing by taking the perspective of a news reporter. Think of yourself as a neutral observer, someone who was not involved in the events. Your goal in phase 2 is to describe your experience from this neutral, objective viewpoint, writing as someone who had just observed what you went through and was now describing that experience. Write in the third person—refer to yourself using third-person pronouns such as “she” or “he.” If you find yourself using first person pronouns, such I or me, delete or cross them out and rewrite that segment using a third person perspective.

As you observe, describe things like:

- Describe the setting or context, especially the place and location where things happened.
- Tell about the other people involved, what they did and how they responded.
- Break down the events into a timeline; describe what happened in a step-by-step manner.
- Describe the short-term and long-term implications of this event for the person (remember that person is you). As a reporter, you are describing what you observed as the implications of the events and experiences for the person involved.

Write continuously for ***at least*** twenty minutes. Try not to take breaks during the writing session—the goal is to let your thoughts flow. In addition, do not edit or judge your writing.

Phase Two (continued)

Stepping Back

Feel free to spend just one day writing from a reporter's perspective, or you might want to write from this perspective for several days. The choice is yours.

When you have finished writing from the perspective of a neutral observer, write about your story again but now write with other audiences in mind:

- Write to your boss or another leader. What would you tell them about what happened and how you experienced these events?
- Write to your family or a close friend. What would you tell them about what happened and how you experienced these events?
- Write to another person involved. What would you tell them about what happened and how you experienced these events?

Again, you might want to write for several days to one or more of these other audiences, or you may choose to write to each audience for only one day. The choice is yours. Feel free to write from any other perspective that you would find helpful.

Phase Three

Writing a Story

In Phase Three your goal is to create a story about your experience, a story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. By writing this way, you are editing your experience through the process of creating a structured storyline about what happened. This is often the phase during which people really start to understand what happened to them because they are able to “process” their experience in a way that is helpful for them.

Do your best to create a plot line for your story:

- Write about the **causes** of important parts of your experience. Focus especially on what caused you to think or feel a certain way. You might write about how specific events were linked to your experiences, or how your experiences were linked to the experiences of other people.
- Write about the **insights** you gained about yourself or the world from the experience. What did you learn? What lessons can you take away from the experience?
- Write about the **benefits** or silver linings that followed the experience. You might have to look hard for these, but it is very important to try to find something good that resulted or followed from the experience.

Take as long as you need to create a well-structured story that describes your experience. In fact, we encourage you to stick with rewriting your story until you are bored with it: being bored is a good indicator that you have processed the story fully.

Phase Four

Imaging Forward

The fourth phase is optional although it can be a very good way to create new personal resources and capabilities. It may also be a good way to prepare yourself for similar experiences in the future. Give it a try, and if you seem to be benefiting from it, keep going. Otherwise, feel free to stop.

In phase four, you will try to imagine a new future. You might write about:

- What did you learn about yourself? How have you grown, improved?
- What will you **do** differently in the future based upon the insights and the things you have learned?
- How will you **live** differently in the future based upon the insights and the things you have learned?

If you want to, you can write about how you would respond differently to the stressful or traumatic event if it happens again in the future. Only write this way if you want to: if you have any concerns about or unpleasant experiences from writing about this, feel free to stop. There is nothing wrong about deciding against writing about what you would do differently.

Finishing Your Life Narrative Writing

You may want to share some of your writings with other people or you may want to keep them private: the choice is yours. If you do share them, you might consider asking those people to simply accept your writings. They do not need to fix things for you, nor should they try to tell you what to do. They are offering support, care, and acceptance. Over time, they may have insights or advice to share with you, and if you have completed all four phases, then you will be in a good position to decide how to receive those insights or their advice.

Finally, remember to write when it helps, stop when it does not help. You are always in control.

Life Narrative Writing as a Practice

Life narrative writing can be helpful in many different parts of life. There is a growing body of research that suggests that it is a good practice to include in our daily life. This research is showing that there are great benefits to be obtained from the somewhat forgotten practices of keeping a life journal or daily diary.

On the next page we list some other approaches to life narrative writing, but you should feel free to adopt your own unique approach.

Life Narrative Writing as a Practice (continued)

Best possible future

Think about your life in the future. Imagine that everything has gone as well as it possibly could. Think of this as realizing your life dreams. Write what you imagined. List at least five specific things that would be happening in this best possible future. Describe these five things in as much detail as you can. And, be sure to write about how you got to this future.

Fostering purpose

Create a list of the things that matter most to you in life. Feel free to take a few days to think of the things on this list. Then, each day, write about one of those things. Describe why it matters and why it is so important to you. Write about how you live out or honor it, and then write about how you will continue to live out or honor it in the future. Again, you might want to take several days to write about each of the things on your list.

Gratitude journals

A great deal of research suggests there is value in giving thanks and counting our blessings. Something as simple as writing, each day, ten things we are thankful for can boost our wellbeing. Try to list at least some new things each day. Write about these things in as much detail as you can. And, feel free to share with others.

Other Resources on Life Narrative Writing

Books

- *Expressive Writing: Words That Heal* by James Pennebaker, Ph.D. and John Evans
- *Opening Up by Writing It Down, Third Edition: How Expressive Writing Improves Health and Eases Emotional* by James W. Pennebaker, Ph.D. and Joshua M. Smyth, Ph.D..
- *Redirect: Changing the Stories We Live By* by Timothy D. Wilson, Ph.D.
- *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma* by Bessel van der Kolk, M.D.

