

Readers,

This document contains my thoughts for an hour-long workshop on writing prepared for the 2018 conference of the Canadian Positive Psychology Association.

Of course these aren't the only possible experiments. In fact, one reader commented about Experiment 6 (Build Habits), "Instead of routines, is there any research behind changing it up? For example, would writing in a new location give new ideas?" What a good idea for another experiment or two: trying to mix things up to see what happens.

These just happened to be the 7 experiments that emerged from my own thinking and from the comments of my clients and workshop participants.

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Write! Experiments to build Skill and Confidence in Your Own Words

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Abstract/Description

Conveying clear written messages that are rooted in research but alive with story helps us reach a broader audience than the people we see face to face.

Many of us run into immense road blocks when we try to write: procrastination, fear, writer's block. Others write in such generalities that audiences have trouble latching on to their messages.

This workshop introduces a set of experiments that would-be writers can use to overcome mental barriers, develop explanatory and story-telling skill, and grow confidence in their own voices. These are experiments because there is no single way to become a better writer. Expert writers try different approaches until they find their own effective combinations.

The experiments we will explore together include collecting story seeds, creating an audience avatar, mindfully exploring structure, separating writing from editing, and various ways of making writing a social experience such as joining a writers' workshop, working with a coach, and finding partners to fill skill gaps.

This is an expansion of the 15-minute talk I gave at the last CPPA conference. The goal is to help people write the clearest, truest words they can find so that they are part of the solution.

Learning objectives:

Participants will leave the room with:

- Greater self-awareness of the obstacles that stand between them and writing
- At least one specific action to increase skill capturing ideas in words
- At least one specific action to build confidence and reduce fear

Just a little about me

After an English major in college, I became a computer scientist and found to my amazement that I spent more time writing English prose than code.

Since I got my MAPP degree in 2006, I've been involved in writing in various ways.

- I have edited more than 1400 articles submitted to Positive Psychology News (PPND). I have also submitted more than 90 articles to PPND, Forbes, the Anita Borg Foundation, and other online publications (though someone else edited them).
- I've edited three books and co-authored another.
- I have writing clients who have worked on books, dissertations, blogs, academic papers, and online magazines. I've seen a number of ways that people get in their own way.
- I've helped numerous clients through various stages of book production, from initial idea generation to final copy-editing.
- Finally, since 2013, I've facilitated more than 600 writers' workshops with more than 60 authors and nearly 1200 pieces of writing.

I've seen a lot of writing come to be. I want to share what I've learned in the process.

Fear is common. Face it and shift attention to the work.

[Ask people to raise their hands for any of these they've experienced.]

Here some of the obstacles I've heard from my clients:

- Hearing the disparaging voice of a high school English teacher reverberating through memory. *Fixed mindset, anyone?*
- Wondering if you have anything to say that hasn't already been said better by somebody else. *Overuse of humility, perhaps?*
- Judging every word as you write it so harshly that you feel like you've been in a fight. *Pessimism in action?*
- Feeling insecure about putting your words out there for other people to judge. *Low self-efficacy, fear of vulnerability?*
- When you sit down to write, it takes you so long to get started that you think you need enormous blocks of time to write, and of course, you never find them in your schedule. *Struggles with self-regulation?*

Christopher Peterson assigned Howard S. Becker's book about writing for the social sciences in one of my first MAPP classes. Becker explains that we didn't really learn how to write effectively in college. There we were more or less coerced to write short essays on topics we knew little about and didn't find very interesting for one reader, who didn't find them very interesting either and only read them because he or she was being paid.

Here are some of the ways our writing experience can be different:

- We're much more expert on what we have to say. We can make a difference in the world.
- We can write and then revise, so the first draft doesn't HAVE to be perfect. •
- Our writing might be read by a lot of people, so we need to keep a broad audience in mind.
- We generally come up with our own deadlines, which can be harder to self-enforce.

Experiments

Why experiments?

Do you feel like you're facing a brick wall when you sit down to write? If you are facing that wall, try SOMETHING. Then look at how well it worked. Are you now writing regularly? Are you treating your writing self with compassion, letting your own voice emerge, letting others read it? Are you learning by observing what about your writing seems to work for other people and when you seem to lose them? If so, great! Keep doing what you're doing and perhaps add another experiment. If not, alter it or try a different experiment.

I'll share a few possible experiments, and then leave you to invent your own.

The point is that we are go about writing differently. My experiments may not work for you, but they may stimulate you to figure out your own.

Here's an experimenter in action:

- I have made To Do lists that include "Write today for 1 hour" - FAIL
- I have bought myself at least 20 different "inspirational" notebooks to motivate me to write - FAIL
- I rarely get to it in the daytime so I have tried to carve out some sexy writing time for myself at night, usually with one or two glasses of wine - WORKS SOMETIMES
- I clean my writing space - WORKS SOMETIMES
- I clean my whole house in advance so I feel I have no outstanding chores to distract me - WORKS SOMETIMES but too often I end up on Pinterest looking at DIY activities to beautify my house some more.
- I've tried a Writer's Workshop - SUCCESS. This is honestly the first time in my whole life (except for college and grad school) where I have been writing consistently and producing materials at least every two weeks. I'm so grateful to have finally found a system that gets me writing. I could still do much better, but I'm very pleased with my progress.

Experiment 1: Start a Session with a Reset Ritual

Picture yourself preparing to write. Many writers find it helpful to have a ritual to break attachment to previous tasks and to open up attention to writing. I've heard these called *reset rituals*. Reset rituals could be physical stretches, they could be going to a particular place and lighting a candle, they could include closing the door and taking the phone off the hook. Experiment to find a reset ritual that works well for you.

Here's one to try. It is based on Character Strength Intervention (CSI) 65 in *Character Strengths Interventions: A Field Guide for Practitioners* by Ryan Niemiec. It also appears on Day 22 in Jane Anderson's new book, *30 Days of Character Strengths*.

Let's do it right now.

Steps:

1. Pause and feel your inbreath and outbreath for 8 breaths. Let everything go except for your breath. Give your breath your full attention.
2. Conclude with a question: Which of my character strengths might I bring forward right now?

What character strength came up for you? How might you use it to move your writing forward?

If you would like examples of mindful pause in action, check out Jane Anderson's book.

Moral for Experiment 1

Clear space in your brain for writing by putting away what went before.

Experiment 2: Create Audience Avatars

Successful writers know why they are writing, who they're writing for, and how they want the world to be changed by their writing. They have mental avatars for their audience that they can mentally talk to when they get stuck. These avatars come from asking Why? Who? How?

Why? Let's explore why you are here, right now, in this room, learning about writing.

[Ask people to raise their hands if they recognize themselves in any of these descriptions.

Some of the why's I've seen / experienced:

1. You want to spin words that make the world a better place by helping people live more flourishing lives. Isn't that the reason we are all at CPPA?
2. You want to make sense of difficult experiences by putting your story into words and then sharing it with others. Perhaps hearing about your struggles will help others face hard times with greater courage and resilience. You may have stories of ordinary heroes that you carry around in your head that help you face hardship well. You want to pay it forward.
3. You want to connect with clients who would benefit from your services.
4. You have an urge to write fiction that makes people sit up straighter and act more nobly.

Who? Who do you picture picking up your writing?

What do they have in common? E.g., age, gender, role, values, concerns

Can you picture someone who represents your audience?

Multiple people if you have a very broad audience?

Imagine inviting them to sit at your table to listen to you read from your work.

How? How will you achieve your why?

How will your audience be different after they've read your work?

What thoughts, behaviors, emotions to you want to evoke?

Morals for Experiment 2

Remembering the why, who, and how supports motivation.

Write them down and revisit whenever you feel stuck.

Experiment 3: Separate Writing and Editing

Writing is scary. It's very easy to look at what you write and think, "Who cares?" "Who do I think I am to write this?" Or even "Todd Kashdan will think I'm dumb."

Practically all writers feel this way, or at least did when they started writing. Time to remember Albert Bandura's 4th approach to self-efficacy: learning to interpret physiological arousal as being cranked up to perform, not as a sign of probable failure. Accept the fear. Then look for ways to shift your focus from the fear to the work.

Here's one experiment to try: divide your work sessions into drafting and editing sessions. When you are writing a first draft, it doesn't matter how dumb it sounds. It's the grist for the mill that will eventually produce something good. Same rules as brainstorming: let all ideas flow without judging because the dumb ideas prepare the way for the really brilliant ones.

If you find that it takes you forever to get past the first paragraph, it's because you are trying to write and edit at the same time. The editor will have its turn... when the draft is ready.

Honor the editor, who takes the raw materials that the writer collected and works with them to add shape and polish. Even editing should be done in stages. There's no point finding the perfect word or correcting the punctuation for a paragraph that ends up on the cutting floor.

1. First draft: Write your ideas as they emerge without worrying about the shape and diction. I often rehearse ideas while doing dishes or other household chores.
2. Structure Draft: Edit for order and structure. Have you buried the lead and need to bring it forward? Are your points in a logical order? Does your conclusion follow naturally?
3. Paragraph Draft: Do all the ideas in each paragraph belong together? Is there a good introductory sentence and a good concluding sentence?
4. Sentences and Diction Draft: Do you have precise clear words? Are all of them needed? Are your sentence structures clear and easy to parse?
5. Final Draft: Read aloud, listening for ways to polish. Check spelling and punctuation

Moral for Experiment 3

Writing and editing (judging) are two distinct steps. Don't do both at the same time.

What's helped me the most has more to do with learning how to work with fear and less to do with specific writing tactics. As you know, it takes a lot of courage to be authentic, but in doing this inner work, I've noticed a direct effect on my writing. Caring less about how to say something so it will appease others and more about speaking from my heart, regardless of how it's received

Realizing that I am not alone in feeling that even if my skills have improved over the years, it doesn't necessarily get easier to write, or more fun. It can be grueling.

Getting the first ugly draft down, and then revising/rewriting, preferably with constructive feedback from others (thank you, Writers Workshop). Subjecting my writing to the scrutiny of others has meant getting used to feeling vulnerable and uncomfortable sometimes.

write what you love, make it authentic always, write for yourself or think of a particular individual it makes it more concrete, don't show your work to critics - be tender and gentle to yourself

What helps me the most is the feedback and enthusiastic support that I get from you and the other participants. I spent years putting off writing because I thought I was mostly a communicator of other people's ideas in the field, but that I did not have my own voice or anything significant to offer. The groups have made me feel like I may have something, modest as it might be, that can be my own contribution. That has made a big difference for me and has been incredibly motivating.

To overcome my internal critic, I took a three-panel cardboard "science fair" presentation display and put photos of people who have supported me in the past. I consider them my cheering section.

Experiment 4: Play with ideas

When it comes to the first pass, think of pulling up ideas from deep in your creative mind, like brainstorming. Here is a technique that I learned from a writing professor, John Smith, who used this approach in many contexts, including teaching engineers to write a large specification for a new networking protocol.

1. Sit down at your writing place with a timer, a stack of yellow stickies, and a marker. Set the timer for 10 minutes.
2. Close your eyes and clear your mind. Don't try to think about what you want to write. Just let your mind settle.
3. When the timer rings, start jotting ideas for your piece on yellow stickies, one or two words as fast as you can.
4. When you've run out of ideas to jot down, place all the stickies on a wall or whiteboard.
5. ***Play*** with rearranging them until you've got a starting outline. Put similar ideas together, try out different orders.
6. Start somewhere in your outline. Pick a stickie and write out what it brings to mind. Turn your internal judge off, assuring it that it will get its chance later.
7. When you need a break, go back and play with the sections of writing you've created. Do other orders emerge? Do other stories come to mind? Your yellow stickie pad is still there, and the yellow stickies on the board can still be moved around.
8. When you have a first draft done, turn your editor back on. Imagine your audience. Are you using jargon? Could you use fewer words? .
9. Don't hesitate to take things out. But save your outtakes. Perhaps they will appear in a different piece of writing.

Morals for Experiment 4

Creativity often involves letting ideas emerge from your subconscious.

Be open to what emerges.

Experiment 5: Collect and Nurture Story Seeds

Remember the final S in Chip and Dan Heath's *Made to Stick: Stories!* Stories make your ideas come alive and stick. But where do stories come from?

As you go through your daily life, things are happening all around you: conflicts, collaborations, exchanges, misunderstandings, meetings of the mind, things you admire, things that cause you despair, victories, setbacks, progress, regression.

There may be many stories there that you could capture, if you just took note. I think of this as collecting story seeds that may grow into full stories with some water and sunlight.

Earlier this year, I had a client who wrote several pages making general statements about her children. I marked up what she sent me with the words, "Could you tell a story to make this quality of your child come alive?" She went through the whole piece and harvested numerous story seeds to fill out in separate writing sessions.

How does this help? Sometimes people sit down to write and draw a blank. Nothing comes to mind. But when she sat down, she could take out her list of story seeds, pick one, and then focus on making it come to life. She could worry about where it fit later.

Keep a log of story seeds. One client does this every night before turning in. When you feel stuck, consult your log to see if you can get unstuck by making a story seed sprout.

With a log of story seeds, you can do some useful writing in an unexpected 15 minutes.

Let's assume you've already written a first draft of a story. Now you want to make sure the story really works for your audience, the people you described in Experiment Two. Here are some guidelines to make the stories vivid:

- Step out of your own shoes and act as if you know nothing about your characters. Then add enough details to help them come to life for the readers. Age, interests, relationships, quirks, are all possibilities
- Make sure that you are showing instead of telling. Just keep asking yourself, "Am I trying to tell people what to think here, or am I letting them experience it themselves?"

- Add dialog – and space it out like dialog.

It can also be helpful to look at your major points and thing backwards to the kinds of stories that you want to be able to tell. Albert Bandura suggests that social diffusion of psychological ideas is best supported by having 3 types of stories about a particular idea, showing good behavior, bad behavior, and transitions from bad to good. Knowing the points you want to illustrate, you can keep your eyes and ears open for examples in the world around you. Imagine you want to write about forgiveness. You could watch for stories of forgiveness, unforgiveness, and people who are trying to go from holding a grudge to forgiving..

Morals for Experiment 5:

Everything that happens in your life can be grist for the writing mill.

Capture possible stories regularly.

Plan for three types of stories: good behavior, bad behavior, transition.

Show, don't tell.

Experiences with Story Seeds

I think what helps is just writing and getting the story seeds down. Where I struggle is with wanting to create an outline and really get the project going.
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Experiment 6: Build Writing Habits

If you want to be a writer, you have to write. For most of us, that means finding a time, a place, a reason, a process... and then sticking to it. That means doing it with conscious intensity at first, with the belief that practiced habits tend to become more automatic. This is another place to experiment to discover the habits will work most for you.

Do you write best in the morning or the evening or at random times? Do you write best in longhand or on your computer or dictating to your phone? Do you write best at your desk, in the kitchen, or in a hotel room you rent for the weekend?

Do you have trouble getting started or do the words start to flow once you sit down? One writer recently told me that he spends forever on the first paragraph. Another says he spends so long figuring out what he's going to write about that he has to have at least two hours to get anything done, but his schedule almost never gives him two-hour blocks. Ergo, no writing done.

One mini-experiment for slow starters to try: when you end a writing session, plan what to write the next time you sit down, even writing your first paragraph. You're warmed up at the end of your session. Perhaps you can do something that will make it easier to get going when you sit down cold.

Morals for Experiment 6

Pick one behavior to practice regularly that will move your writing forward.

Here are some experiences related to setting up habits:

Establish a writing habit. Writing a blog or a book appears to be so easy....just sit down and write. But putting together a coherent way that relates to an audience is not always that easy. I have never been able to write under pressure, sitting for hours and pouring out my thoughts just before a deadline. Also, I would tell myself I would write but then a bigger "priority" would suck up that time. A better approach, for me at least, was to establish a habit of writing. Whether daily for an hour or several times a week, I started by carving out a little bit of time each time each day, literally starting with 5 minutes and gradually increasing the time. By writing regularly, I began to hear my voice, allow my thoughts to percolate, and create new content as well as edit old.

Writing something every day, even if it is just an email to a friend. (That famous example of the pottery class comes to mind, where the students who had to produce a certain quantity of pots over time had higher quality than the students who had to produce one perfect pot).

write messy, proof reading and punctuation slows down the creative process that's what editing is for (after you've written for a while). know your rhythms when is the best time for you to flow
read your work out loud it makes the difference between reading it silently in your head and hearing the words spoken

What's helped me as a writer is the accountability of having to write something every 2 weeks.

Deadline. Having to submit my piece makes me a. write it b. improve it.

What has helped me the very most has been having deadlines (our workshop). So much of writing includes self-imposed deadlines so being accountable to our group is big for me. Also, this means that I am writing and that is how you write better - by just doing it over and over.

Sacred space.

but one thing that is helpful for me is to break a large project (my book) into more manageable (weekly) chunks and get feedback from the group to cheer me on for each milestone along the way.

Experiment 7: Make Writing Social

Writing is essentially social, an attempt to connect with others. Yet, we usually do it alone. Might there be a clue here for a way to make it easier?

What if one of the best ways to learn how to write is to do it socially? In the fall of 2013, I started experimenting with writers' workshops for people who wanted to write books, blogs, academic papers, workbooks, articles, and marketing materials. After a while, some started submitting short stories and novel chapters. Up until recently I could say I'd seen practically every sort of writing except poetry. But then one group member recently submitted a poem.

Since 2013, we've tried different days, different media, different group sizes, different durations, different review patterns. In fact, we keep experimenting.

What hasn't changed is this: Writers' workshops are gift-based communities that help people shift attention from the fear to the work. You could join one. You could even create one with your writing friends.

What happens in a writers' workshops work?

Everyone gets the pieces ahead of time and prepares by reading them and making a few notes to have something to say for each of the three rounds described below.

For each piece, the author is invited to introduce it very briefly and then read a paragraph so that the group hears it in the author's voice. Then the author is invited to become a fly on the wall and not speak again until the end of the review. This represents the fact that the author doesn't get to travel with the writing after it is published. I also remind authors that their notes are the record of the meeting. They will get no written comments from other participants.

Round One: In turn, each reviewer describes how he/she experienced the work. This can be a short summary, a statement of the major theme, or a discussion of emotional impact.

Round Two: In turn, each reviewer describes what is strong in the piece. They might comment on the theme, the story arc, what gave the message power. They can also read out loud particular sentences that clicked for them. We start with each person being called on to give the

top strength he/she observed. Then the floor is open for additional strengths until we're ready to move on. Everybody is obligated to point out at least one strength.

Round Three: In turn, each reviewer describes what would make the piece even stronger, in his or her opinion. Once again, I call on each person for top suggestions and then open the floor.

Finally, we invite the author back into the circle to ask questions for clarification. Somebody may have made a suggestion that the author didn't quite catch. The author is not allowed to explain or defend. After all, the piece belongs to the author who can take or leave any comment made by the group.

Then we thank the author for allowing us to share in the act of creation.

Writers' workshops are a way to build skill

In a group of 4 writers, your pieces will get only one quarter of the attention. You're busy. Why spend time on a process that involves reviewing other people's writing?

Because building skill comes through practice and paying attention, and reviewing is an excellent way to pay attention and practice. As you recognize something done particularly well, you pick up new ways of making meaning. As you struggle with things that aren't clear, you figure out ways to keep your own audience in mind.

Morals for Experiment 7

- Writing does not have to be an entirely solitary activity
- You can become a better writer by practicing and paying attention to what works and doesn't work in other people's writing.
- Learning how to explain what makes a piece of writing strong is a way to build skill.
- Often other people see strengths in your writing that you hadn't seen yourself.

Comments about Writers' workshops:

There is nothing like a deadline that you have or are committed to publicly.

It has helped me to be in a group with other writers whose submissions are not "there" yet. It is so much easier to start when I am not aiming for perfection--just to do as well as my peers.

It helps to have a goal--and a destination--in mind for your writing and maybe a back-up one.

It has also been surprisingly encouraging to have other writers engage with the subject matter as well as the form of my writing. I had forgotten how when I was writing for a living, I loved the rare moments when an editor wanted me by his or her side so we could grapple with (usually content) difficulties together and turn the draft into the near-final copy.

In terms of persisting and putting my work out there, having support helps a lot! Also, prioritizing writing even if I don't have an agenda to post a blog or submit to a magazine. Just giving time and space to the creative voice inside without a set goal, and then if I feel inspired to make something out of it, so be it!

Get support and accountability. Kathryn, your writing group is ideal because it offers a hard deadline for writing. It offers a safe environment to float drafts and ideas. It offers connection, which makes the writing less of a solo endeavor (especially important for us extroverts!).

the positive feedback combined with tender suggestions made all of the difference for me.

signing up for your creative writing class has by far helped me the most. Committing to a clear schedule of writing / turning in assignments has given me the accountability I so needed. So thank you again for that, I so appreciate the structure and feedback you have provided already!

What has always worked best for me as a writer is deadlines. Whether I was a student, a professional or a freelancer, deadlines always motivated me to sit at my desk and do it. That's why I took your workshop, and it worked!

b) It's such a supportive group. The three questions [you ask/ Kathryn asks - *choose whichever's better*] are incredibly supportive. There's not that "someone is going to hate and critique my writing" aspect. It's just what's it about - what was strong - what could be stronger. I feel like I can take or not take the suggestions, and that these are suggestions and I'm after all the boss of how things will go.

Feedback. Getting feedback from peers whether in writing or discussion (even better) really helps me improve my writing.

The exchange with an audience. Aside from commentary, it brings the work to life.

The ability to give back to writing colleagues by reviewing their work.

Having a framework that allows for constructive criticism. I love the “fly on the wall” method. I can just listen and absorb.

Yet by far the *most* helpful is the supportive, encouraging community that you create. It's hard to put my finger on any one thing that creates that community, but it's partially due to the Positive Psychology -esque framing of the questions (Round 2 "Strong" and Round 3 "Even Stronger"), partially due to the wisdom/insights that you share, the extra reading/references that you recommend and perhaps most of all due to your warmth and deeply authentic caring for your writers. This creates the kind of safe, encouraging space to experiment, build confidence and grow as a writer. I know that I'd still be staring at a blank page 1 without your encouragement.

Conclusion

What can you take away from this discussion?

Everybody faces writing with some fear. Good writers accept the fear, treat themselves with compassion, and get on with it.

Learning to write even better is easier in a group than by yourself. That group can be one other person (a writing coach?) but being able to run your ideas up the flagpole and see what happens helps you keep experimenting, paying attention, and getting better. Groups can give you honest feedback about what does and doesn't work, but they are there with you. In the midst of struggling.

You won't feel alone.

Acknowledgment:

I took this script to one of my workshops for review, so I got to experience being the fly on the wall myself. It is a great way to be able to listen closely without being preoccupied with how to respond.

Let me thank Lee K Bohlen, Jan Stanley, Cindy Maher, Karen Warner, Andrew Brady, Leora Rifkin, Brian Branagan, and Lisa Sansom for telling me what it said to them, pointing out parts that they found particularly powerful, and suggesting ways to make it stronger.