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Writing Scared

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Is writing the cause of anxiety, its cure, or both, or neither?

For students crippled by exam anxiety, the best remedy may be to write about it before they sit down to take a test. So writes Sian Beilock, a psychology professor at the University of Chicago, in post last week at Psychology Today, in which she discusses the results of several intriguing experiments that she conducted in classroom settings:

For those students given the opportunity to express their thoughts and feelings about the upcoming test, the relation between test anxiety and exam performance was essentially non-existent.

Writing has long been valued as a reflective tool—by keeping a journal, we not only create a minor memorial of our lives at a particular moment, but think back on the past to teach ourselves lessons for the future. But by the time we settle in to compose our thoughts on the day, the events we’re considering have already happened. Writing about our successes and failures, while useful and often psychically beneficial, can feel static and rote, and sometimes send the mind tumbling into regret. Additionally, if we’re honestly trying to chronicle the past, we are confined to record what really happened, and thus our imagination is confined as well.

But what if we write about the future, imagining a variety of outcomes, indulging either in our greatest fears—and

thus, hopefully, calming them—or bolstering our confidence with a kind of visionary hopefulness? (I'd be interested to learn if students who wrote optimistically about the test outperformed those inclined to express self-doubt.) I can picture this kind of pre-writing being valuable in all kinds of situations, whether it comes before a job interview, a stressful conversation, or just the mundane tasks of daily life. We do this often in list form, which gives us something fun to check off as the day goes on. But lists offer little of the creative space that comes from real writing, from putting sentences together, tinkering with words, and stepping out of a situation to think abstractly. Beilock explains why writing may help:

Writing reduces people's tendency to ruminate because it provides them with an opportunity to express their concerns. Expressing concerns gives people some insight into the source of their stress, allowing them to reexamine the situation such that the tendency to worry during the actual pressure-filled situation decreases.

All this leads to a question: What if the anxiety you are trying to alleviate is related to writing itself? Not writing in an exam setting—though those essay tests can be tough—but the kind of writing that in itself is an act of rumination. From the greatest masters to the humblest scribblers, writers have often remarked on the pains of their craft. Faced with an assignment, writers can struggle at every point—to start, to continue, and to finish. “Then how should I begin...” (Eliot). “When will this end?” (me). Each stage brings with it its own perils, which can make the keyboard and the computer screen take on a repellent magnetic power, thrusting us would-be writers (me and my fellow humble scribblers) away from our desks, out of the room, and onto any number of other tasks. (Or, to ruin the formulation, away from the blank document and onto planet distraction itself, the Internet.) We know about the lure of procrastination in all pursuits, but some of us avoid writing, though we may claim to like or even love it, with a special panache. This week at *Psychology Today* (a special haven, it seems, for beleaguered writers) Kate F. Hays discusses her writing process, and gives special attention to the anxieties—internal doubt at one's worth, along with worries about the reaction of readers—that many people face when writing.

“You think that's original?!” “You haven't done enough research!” “You can't write yourself out of a paper bag!”

Hays is interested in the ways in which writing is at once a private and public performance, and the questions above should sound familiar to most people who write for public consumption. Yet there is something about the construction of sentences, even those that you have no intention of sharing with others, that can set the mind reeling. Yes, we become frustrated at our limitations. Yes, we worry that others won't like or understand what we have written. But at times the act itself, of transmitting ideas from our brain to the screen, can become paralyzing. Sentences begin, gain steam, then falter. We despair, and take on pained faces. Words seem to get stuck at the elbow, or the wrist, or on the tips of fingers—lost in transit, if not translation. In these cases, writing it out, even in the freest and most associative style, offers little hope. The disease cannot also be the cure.

Driven to this anguished distraction, the solution may be to read the sentences of others, to admire work done well, or if the right books are at hand, done superbly. A useful guide in the quest for good example might be Stanley Fish's new book, “How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One,” in which the professor and *Times* columnist shares his connoisseurship of the elegant sentence. (Slate's *Brow Beat* blog collected readers' favorite English sentences this week, from which Fish will pick his favorite.) In the *Financial Times*, Adam Haslett compares Fish's book, instructively, to Strunk and White's “The Elements of Style,” the standard bearer of linguistic guidance for several generations. At the center of Haslett's essay is the idea that the sentence, rather than simply being a signifier of meaning, can also be a private incident of harmony:

“The writing of complete sentences for aural pleasure as well as news is going the way of the playing of musical instruments—it's becoming a specialty rather than a means most people have to a little amateur, unselfconscious

enjoyment.”

Perhaps this is why writing, even its most private version, can be so taxing—because we all know, that behind or amidst our poor jumble on the page or screen, is a more perfect sound.

(“Hand with Pen,” by Melvin_Es.)

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