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[Writing about anxiety may boost test scores](#)

You probably remember it all too well: clenching your teeth as the teacher handed out the final exam, worrying about what curve-ball problems might appear and how your score would affect your GPA.

It's as if your brain is a computer running too many programs at once, says Sian Beilock, associate professor of psychology at the University of Chicago. Stressing about the consequences of your score uses up valuable thinking and resources in your brain, and can actually make you perform

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worse when you actually start taking the test.

It turns out that writing about these anxieties right before the test may boost a grade. A new study in the journal Science suggests that high school and college students may significantly benefit from putting their worries on paper before taking an exam.

"How students perform on a test isn't necessarily indicative of true ability," said Beilock, senior author of the study. If students have the opportunity to reexamine the situation by expressing their thoughts, it may seem better than they originally thought, she said, and such anxieties are less likely to pop up during the test itself.

The study consisted of four experiments, two in the laboratory with college students and two in real-life biology classrooms with 9th graders.

With the college students, Beilock and colleagues compared the performance on a math test of students asked to write about their anxieties against those told to sit quietly during that time. All participants had stress on the second test of the experiments because they were told they would receive money if they did well, and that others were counting on them. Researchers also told the students they were being videotaped and that math teachers would review the work.

It turned out that participants who did not write about their stress had scores that dropped 12%, on average, from the first to second math test, whereas the students who wrote about their thoughts improved 5% on average. Researchers observed a similar pattern when comparing participants doing the expressive writing with those writing about other topics.

The concept worked in real-life settings, too. Ninth-graders taking a biology final exam took an initial assessment of anxiety about the test beforehand. Those highest in anxiety had an average grade of B- on the test if they did not do the expressive writing; those who did averaged B+. This effect was shown on two different occasions with different students.

The intervention studied here doesn't require a lot of time, money or resources from schools; in fact, students could just do it on their own time, she said. And it has all sorts of applications outside the classroom - preparing for job interviews, speeches and big sports games, to name a few, Beilock said.

"This sort of writing might be beneficial in other activities, from the boardroom to the classroom to the playing field," said

Next steps in this line of research include testing the idea on younger students, and looking at what effect the expressive writing has on brain activity.

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1. *V.Saxena*

Very cool study! \*pulls out notebook and starts writing in preparation of upcoming STD test, lol (j/k)\*

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2. *MashaSobaka*