
Throw the Notebook at the Wall: What Writing Can Do to the Average Student

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A Revelation from Drowsiness

My phone beeps loudly three times in the dull quiet of the morning. I groan inwardly as I curse my friends for being such early risers. I lift my head and look at the clock: 8:35 A.M. I groan to myself again because I don't have a class until noon. My head falls back onto the soft, welcoming pillow as my hand gropes for my phone on the floor somewhere. I find it, open it, and use my arm to bring it right in front of my face instead of bothering to move my head. It's a text from my friend Jason, back in Ohio. It reads somewhat cryptically: "What was on the sandwiches we ate in Norway?"

I stare at it confusedly for a few seconds, through the haze of the sleep that I should be getting right now, when the meaning hits me. Oh, I think, that Norway. For Spring Break last year, our marching band went on a week-long trip to Florida and, of course, visited Disney World. We had lunch one day in Norway at EPCOT. I text him back: "Jeez... I can't remember. All I remember is the desserts lol."

Yes, that's right. I am starting to remember now. The sandwiches were good, but not altogether extraordinary. The desserts, however, were phenomenal. The phone beeps again, much to my disappointment that he doesn't drop it and let me sleep. It reads: "Ok, then give me as much description as you can on that."

"Umm," I start texting back, "I had a chocolate mousse cake that had the little edible chocolate straw thing..." It's coming back to me now. I sit up in bed and look at the blank wall for a second, suddenly seeing the event perfectly in my mind. "I think you had one of those giant pretzels that was very light and sweet. I think someone had a raspberry cheesecake, or maybe it was strawberry..."

Well, I'm awake now, I suppose. I swing my legs out of bed and get up to go take a shower. It's odd how I could remember such an insignificant meal from six months ago. I think getting the first bit out opened a floodgate of sorts for the other details that my brain saved for some reason. Wait a minute...why am I suddenly so awake?

The act of writing is something that every literate human being does every day. From a toddler rearranging their letter-shaped chicken nuggets to an astrophysicist writing an article on black holes, writing lies beneath the activities that define us. In my own experience, a single day's writing can include taking notes, sending text messages, writing a paper and updating my Facebook status. Writing is a very mysterious entity. It weaves itself into the fabric of society on every level without even letting on that it's there. In my tale above, writing via texts catapulted me from practically asleep to fully alert within minutes. Thinking through the power that writing had on me

in this episode prompted me to delve into how the simple act of composing strings of words can so strongly affect one's psychological state of being.

“Yes, I write every day.”

Writing is one of the main tasks that a college student must perform in order to be successful in school, as seen with the untold amounts of writing that a student may be required to do for a class. Even classes that seemingly have nothing to do with writing (Oral Communication, for instance) base their curriculum around some type of student writing.

Though writing is central to student life, the students I interviewed have very differing opinions on writing. In my interviews, it was said to be both “a calming kind of exercise” and “a necessary evil.” Writing has even been proven to be “calming.” Researchers Linda Cameron and Gregory Nicholls found that “writing about one's thoughts and feelings regarding stressful events for up to 20 minutes on each of several days can reduce health clinic visits, ... decrease absenteeism, ... and improve grade point averages among first-year college students” (84). Writing affects many parts of a college student's life, and I have taken it upon myself to figure out how this happens and, to a certain extent, why this happens.

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I have considered the entire spectrum of the human mind in order to find out all that I can about the effects of writing on individual mental states. It has shown me what happens when someone gets frustrated because a writing assignment isn't going well, and it has shown me what happens when someone gets excited because an act of writing is going much better than they expected. I've found cases of people writing things that they didn't even know that they knew, as well as people simply not able to write what they know all too well. The mysteries of writing are everywhere; it's just that most people never choose to look at them and recognize them for what they actually are. It has been my goal to widen the keyhole from which these mysteries are observed and to be able to better explain the writing process because of it.

I knew this research would be difficult, as psychological phenomena are difficult to trace, but I had no idea that it would turn out to be a task that I could never hope to accomplish in the time that I had. The psychological happenings that are caused by the mere act of writing words on paper are more numerous than I thought, and that doesn't even begin to cover the phenomena that occur because of what is actually written.

Methodology

In this section I outline the three steps of my research into the effects of writing on psychological states: space invasion, privacy invasion, and subliminal invasion.

Space Invasion

I observed three places in which a large number of students attempted to accomplish nothing but writing. One was in the hallway of an academic building, next to a large wall of windows that provided many distractions for the writers and thinkers. The next was in an actual classroom, but with a dynamic and radically unpredictable speaker at the helm who never let the audience have a minute of rest. The final session occurred in a bookstore café, with countless distractions in TVs, other people, food, and books. Each of the locations I observed contained their own reasons for the writing process to fail and they invoked different reactions by the writer while attempting to write.

I decided that this would be my first mode of research because it allowed me to observe whatever behavior the writer was willing to perform in public. These actions are usually done

without thinking, which allowed me to see the most natural type of writing effects. These included writers yawning, scratching their heads, tapping their pens, and looking at anything except their papers. The information gained through this method of research was more abundant than I thought it would be as it gave me a glimpse at the entire process of writing instead of just singular events.

Privacy Invasion

I knew that many of the psychological effects of writing would not present themselves via physical actions like those apparent in an observation. To further my knowledge of writing's effects, I would have to delve deeper into one's mind. A person tends to think about things that happen to them more than express them in physical actions, and thus my next attempt at solving writing's mystery was a series of four interviews, conducted with four college students, in order to determine how they viewed their own writing habits and how they thought writing affected them psychologically.

The first interviewee, who chose the pseudonym "James Bond," is the only student from UCF that I interviewed. He is a typical male college student with a love of sports, but he has a refreshing view on the stupidity of the school's administration with the setup of some classes. The second interviewee, "Eros Antares," is an English major currently living at home and going to school in suburban Ohio. She has a rough relationship with her family, which has contributed to her critical view on the current state of things but everlasting optimism for the future. Third, "Nikola G. Neere" (N.G. Neere) is an Electrical Engineering major at Purdue University and has a very pessimistic view on anything language-related. Fourth was "Basil Amadeus," who is at Missouri University of Science and Technology studying Mechanical Engineering. He is one of the most analytical people I have ever met, and I know for a fact that he analyzes nearly everything he does. The final three interviews were done via Skype with the subjects in their bedrooms or dorm rooms. I found that this led them to be more frank and honest with their answers, thus giving me deeper insight into their minds.

Subliminal Invasion

While performing my interviews I found that the subjects didn't readily acknowledge the fact that writing even had an effect on them. It was evident to me, then, that the idea that writing actively affects the writer—a view shared by the authors of countless articles published in scholarly journals—is not generally accepted by the public. I have found five articles that discuss very different aspects of the writing process, yet each makes important statements to help prove the main points of my overall argument on the psychological effectiveness of writing.

Studies like the ones done in the articles I analyzed perform a task that I would be unable to do on my own: invade the subconscious mind. The researchers found many ways that writing can affect the writer that he or she wouldn't even realize or attribute to writing. These range from decreased stress levels, to improving their skills at argument, to simply increasing intelligence (Cameron and Nichols; Rafoth and Rubin; Ashbaugh, Johnstone, and Warfield). My final journey into the minds of writers was one that the writers themselves cannot even make, and so completed my examination of the full range of effects that may have been caused by writing, at all levels of thought.

Findings

I went into my research with some thoughts on what I thought that I would find, based on my own experiences, but it turned out that my initial hypotheses for the psychological effects of writing fell far short of what I would later find. I found that writing most significantly affected three aspects of a person's psychology: behavior, mood, and knowledge. Upon later inspection, I found

correlations between these findings and my own experiences as recorded in the early stages of my research, and so begin each section with entries to my field notes dated September 1, 2011.

“If I’m actually writing, I think about it more”

Now I am sitting in my General Psychology class listening to the professor explain what research methods psychologists use to develop new theories and test old ones. I type furiously along with most of the rest of the class as he speeds through his PowerPoint, not giving us nearly enough time to get everything written down. One poor kid sitting to the left and behind me tried to take notes the old-fashioned way with paper and pencil, but it seems he quickly fell behind and now just sits looking slightly dejected. We advance to the next slide, “Ethics in Psychological Research,” that lists seven tests of ethical behavior for psychologists. I am halfway through the second test when I am forced to suppress a yawn that would have otherwise been very loud and public. I type even more furiously now, aware of the precious seconds lost with the yawn. I can’t seem to get the words out though. Frequent typos and formatting problems arise which I must correct, else my OCD will surface and cause even more delays. I only get halfway through the fourth test when he moves on. Now he is putting in a video about something that I can’t recall. For some reason I am now extremely tired again. I don’t think it was the precious sleep I lost earlier though.

Currently in my Intro to Hospitality class, I am once again wide awake and alert as I listen to the professor tell us a slightly doubtful story about how tourism caused the downfall of the Soviet Union. It is an interesting theory, though I still don’t think tourism had that big of an impact. He advances to the next slide of his PowerPoint, which has much less total information to copy down than my psychology professor’s. I record what is on the screen quickly and accurately, making only one mistake when attempting to spell the word “Excursionist.” As he goes into another of his long and slightly irrelevant, yet still intriguing, metaphors, I think that maybe it was my level of interest that caused such a drastic change in both my alertness and typing accuracy between the two classes. I soon learn that this is probably true, as class is over much sooner than I expected. Maybe time does fly when you’re having fun. Or at least when you’re not bored out of your mind.

Hollis Ashbaugh, Karla Johnstone and Terry Warfield performed an experiment to determine how much the act of writing affected a student’s learning in specific domains; in this case, they wanted to know if writing about accounting helped accounting students more than others. They analyzed previous studies that had proven the effectiveness of writing as a learning tool as inspiration to go further and test if the content of the writing also played a part. It turns out that it does. The results suggested that, while the accounting students actually did fewer total writing assignments than non-accounting students, they did better in school in terms of GPAs and college credits achieved. This indicated that writing about one’s own field is much more influential in the general learning process than simply writing on general topics. This study proves quite definitively that not only can writing actually make students smarter in general, but it can make students smarter in areas that you aren’t writing about if what you are writing about is an area of interest to you. I experienced this personally, as I ended up doing significantly better in my Intro to Hospitality class than my General Psychology class.

As it happens, the situation in which the writing is done is also a factor that determines how much is gained through it. Bennet Rafoth and David Rubin discuss the role that the rhetorical “audience” plays in how a writer chooses to write his or her piece specifically, Rafoth and Rubin study how the social cognition of writers affects their ability to write effectively in a narrative form. They used four tests to determine each participant’s social cognitive ability and compared those results with analyses of two writing samples taken from each participant, one expository and one persuasive. They found that the social cognitive attribute most connected to effective writing was “impression organization,” or the ability to assess a person’s personality traits. The authors’ findings correlate with some of the findings of studies done before them on this topic, but still leave

open a question: “When writing does not manifest a clear socially instrumental or manipulative intent, however, the role of social cognition is less apparent. In many cases writers do not address a well-defined reader or readership but rather invoke, fictionalize, or construct an image of an audience” (10). They found that writers with a greater ability to imagine an audience for their paper ended up writing better papers, and therefore get more out of the actual writing process.

These studies present the method by which writing is able to generate a greater ability for knowledge in the writer, but through my interviews I determined that it was possible to generate new knowledge just by writing. My subjects conveyed experiences in which the writing process had actually caused opinions to surface that were previously unknown to their conscious minds. Nikola G. Neere said of this experience, “I’ve just written things that’s, like, ‘Really, did I just say that? That’s kind of weird that I would say that.’ Like, I don’t know, something I wouldn’t have expected myself to say... it puzzles me as to why I would have written that.” Likewise, Basil Amadeus related an experience that shows how powerful writing can be in the subconscious mind. Here is that portion of his interview:

Me: Okay, uh... Does writing ever prompt unexpected psychological phenomena that concern you?

Basil: *(laughs)* Could you elaborate on that question?

Me: While writing, do you ever... come across... a state of mind that concerns you?

Basil: *(long pause)* Hmm... *(long pause)* Uhhh... *(long pause)* Ummm... *(unintelligible sounds)* Well I guess... sometimes. Because like, for example, when I wrote the paper about uh, thinking and why thinking is important and everything. So when I wrote that paper and I wrote that people who don’t think have no purpose in the world, you know, I kind of felt... bad, because, you know, that’s a lot of people that I’m like, you know, we might as well kill. So I felt that my logic and morality didn’t match up, and that was not a good sensation.

Besides showing how logic can get people in trouble, this anecdote serves as a prime example of how writing can reveal things about a person that even that person did not know. As a whole, my subjects proved that writing can affect the subconscious and bring it to the conscious mind as well as simply affecting one’s mood.

“Can I say it goes both ways?”

I get back to my room after a day full of classes, slightly exhausted. The first thing I do is take out my laptop, and plug all the random cords back into it. I quickly open it up and log on to my various email accounts. For some reason, I’ve always gotten this anxious feeling when I can’t check my email for more than 3 or 4 hours. Anyways, I get onto my university email and see that I have an email from my advisor over at Rosen. She wants to meet up tomorrow to get to know each other. I hit reply, click the cursor inside the body of the message, put my hands to the keyboard and freeze. I have no idea how to start the message. Since I’ve never met her, I don’t know if I should go with a traditional “Dear Dr. Chen,” or maybe a less formal “Hi Dr. Chen,” or even a “With Sincere Regards to the Inimitable Dr. Chen.” I almost never email anyone anymore anyways, so I haven’t bothered keeping up with standard email etiquette. I decide to play it safe and go with “Dear Dr. Chen.” I keep the email short and sweet so that I don’t take up any more of her possibly precious time than I have to, and hit send.

I let out a deep breath at finally being through with that oddly short and easy to deal with ordeal. I’ve always had a little trouble conversing openly with persons of authority, but I never thought that it would extend even into indirect communication, such as email. I was tired, so that might have caused it, but I was actually getting more nervous as I wrote it. Could it be that the act of writing is what caused my nervousness, instead of my tiredness causing me to be nervous about the writing?

When doing my interviews, I realized that before I could accurately obtain a self-assessment of how writing affected a person's psychological state, he or she had to first realize that it was possible for that to happen. To get their initial opinion on this subject, I asked my subjects the following: "Which of the following do you agree with: mood affects writing or writing affects mood?" Three of the four subjects said that they believed both to be true, though they were skeptical of how much writing could affect one's mood. Eros Antares said, "[W]riting can affect your

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mood because, well at least for me, writing is a calming kind of exercise." On the other hand, Basil Amadeus did not believe that writing even had the ability to affect one's mood, saying "[I]t can't affect me emotionally." He explained this by remarking on the inability to have an emotional bond with academic writing, so it could not affect one's mood because of the lack of connectivity between the emotion and the writing. However, he later said, "I wrote that people who don't think have no purpose in the world and I kind of felt bad." This statement indicates that, even though he does not acknowledge the fact, his writing can have an effect on his emotional state. In fact, all of my interviewees unwittingly confirmed that writing affects their moods later on in their interviews. Nikola G. Neere related it back to academics, saying, "If

I'm writing something for a grade I might get nervous of if whoever is grading this is going to like the way I'm writing it." It is true that writing can cause negative moods, as proved with the experiences of both my interviewees and myself. This, however, is not always the case.

Linda Cameron and Gregory Nicholls researched whether or not writing about something stressful will decrease the stress related to that event in the future. They predicted, and in the end found, that when students guide themselves in their writing about stressful topics, it generally leads them to become more optimistic. This increased optimism can then lead to the results of an increased GPA or missing fewer classes. Cameron and Nicholls also found that this is not an all-powerful technique, though, as not all participants benefitted, explained by differences in optimists and pessimists. This proves my interviewees correct when they say that the relationship between writing and mood is not unidirectional. The bad mood of pessimists affects their writing style to the point that it does not help them get over bad experiences, and in some cases even made it worse.

Distract*distract*distract*distract

Back in my room after a long day of classes, emails and the like, I open up my laptop and get on Facebook to see what my friends have been up to. I glance at the clock on my laptop and it reads 11:12pm. My phone suddenly beeps three times, slightly scaring me at the unexpected intrusion to my quiet room. I look at it, and it's a text from my friend Amy. She wants to know how my day has been. I tell her that my day has been boring for the most part, with nothing out of the ordinary happening.

At this point, my friend Jason messages me on Facebook. He is saying that he just looked at this link I sent him earlier today. It was a link to a competition hosted by Disney Imagineering each year, with the opportunity to win a free trip to Disneyland and tour the Imagineering facilities. Jason complains that you have to be a junior or senior in college to qualify for entry. I, however, explain to him the nature of some of the past winning projects and he agrees we should get started now. Meanwhile, my conversation with Amy is still going on nicely. She's had a good day, spent with her ex-boyfriend relieving some stress (complicated story, don't ask).

Jason's first idea for our project is an Atlantis themed resort at Disney World. We both have always been fascinated by Atlantis, so this seems like a great idea, but we can't figure out how to make it fit in with the Disney persona of sorts. Then it hits me like a train. "WE COULD BREED FISH WITH MICKEY'S HEAD IN THEIR SCALES!!!!!" I yell as loudly as possible through text.

Amy is now going on about her appointment with her therapist that she had earlier today. This is quite an odd pair of conversations I'm having, I think. I'm able to keep myself serious in my conversation with Amy, though, as we both point out everything her mother has done to make her go see a therapist in the first place.

"Why does the DoD (Department of Defense) own a hotel at Disney?" Jason asks me. I explain it to him, and how now it isn't a military-only resort. I also attempt to tell him that there are too many hotels at Disney already so we should design a ride or something instead.

Now Amy is telling me about all the vitamins and supplements that her therapist has her taking to help her sleep better. It makes sense; she has had sleep problems for the last few weeks.

Suddenly, Jason hits a goldmine in brainstorming. I would tell you about it here, but I don't want you going and getting any ideas. My mind reverts completely as a set of sparks go off that quickly transform themselves into reasons why this idea is fantastic. The idea even incorporates some of the things we know how to do best, though we would need to find a graphic designer to help. Him being an engineering major and me being a very engineering-minded hospitality major, our weakness is obviously in the arts. Luckily I know just the person, Amy. Crap! I had completely forgotten about Amy. I look at the clock and it reads 1:32am, a little over an hour since I last texted her. Wow, I think, my one-track-mindedness really took over for a long time, and I never even realized it. I had no idea I had been working for that long.

I sit back in my chair and try to calm my mind down from the marathon it had just run. The strange thing is that even as I calm myself, I am completely alert and awake, even though I've been up since 8am, and it's now nearing 2am. That's eighteen hours I've been awake. I decide to try to go to bed, even though my mind is still reeling with the Disney project. (Ex post facto note: It didn't work, I was awake at least another hour.)

In my research, particularly the observations I did of people's public behavior, I found that writing inspires action. A good example of how writing affected behavior positively came from Basil Amadeus, who suggested, "If I write like something, that, you know, I really like the wording of or something, I'll get a little bit, like, excited, and, you know, I'll dwell on it for the next hour and a half." Other interviewees focus on the negative effects. Eros Antares said, "If I write something that makes me angry, by the time I'm done, I'm ready to like, throw the notebook at the wall."

The majority of cases in which writing directly affects physical action, however, are not so much based on emotion. During my observations I found that most of the time, writing affected a person's behavior such that it made them stop writing. In the bookstore café, I saw someone writing what looked to be a rough draft of a paper. At one point she stopped, brought her writing hand up to her forehead, and started tapping the pen against it repeatedly. I thought it was amusing, and I have been known to do the same when I am searching for what I want to say. Upon further inspection, however, I noticed she wasn't even looking at her paper and was instead looking around the room, browsing from person to person. I realized that her pen wasn't going *think*think*think*think*, like mine does so often, but it was going *distract*distract*distract*distract*. This prompted me to start looking to see if other writers got as distracted as she did when writing, and if they did, how often.

My most revealing insights into the distractions that cause people to stop writing came from one person in the hallway of the Health and Public Affairs building. I was able to see his entire writing process from start to finish. In the beginning, he looked to be very determined and ready to write, and he did so with a good amount of focus for about five minutes. It was at that moment that a subjectively attractive member of the opposite sex walked down the hallway past us. It didn't take long for him to notice her, and while he tried to hide his lust-filled gaze, it was still pretty obvious.

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His writing was then neglected for at least a couple of minutes, even after the object of attraction had left. He tried to start writing again, but that initial determination was long gone. He couldn't go more than a minute without glancing out the window or down the hallway.

It may not seem like his writing was the impetus for these distractions, and therefore it wasn't his writing that was affecting his behavior. In the case of the femme fatale that is true; it was his lust for her that was distracting. This served to break his connection from the focus that was keeping him writing, though. Whenever he tried to write after this event, he was consciously aware of the fact that the writing was keeping him from thinking of the woman, and thus could not continue writing without becoming distracted.

Sarah Ransdell presents data on how writers are able to become distracted because of an unlikely foe: their writing. She had a group of students write something normally and another group of students write something while thinking aloud. The results were conclusive; writers who thought out loud had a significantly lower typing speed than those who thought to themselves. She also hypothesized a correlation between completion time and content:

Writers in the present study produced descriptive narratives about the first days of college, and therefore were probably not overly taxed by the task.... If rate of composition continues to be slowed during thinking aloud as the task becomes more demanding, conceivably there is a point at which rate negatively influences the course and sequence of the process (96).

It seems kind of obvious that writing something that requires more thought takes more time, but my research has shown in multiple ways that writing something that the writer lacks a connection to has shown an even greater effect.

Implications

The idea that the writing process affects individuals has been demonstrated in numerous academic studies. These studies have even elaborated on the ways the writing process accomplishes this and how it can be used most efficiently to benefit a person's education. For instance, studies show that writing about one's interests has the ability to increase the capacity for knowledge in general much more so than writing about something that one does not find

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interesting (Ashbaugh, Johnstone, and Warfield). Writing can also be detrimental, though, if done incorrectly. My research into the way that distractions affect writers has shown that the choices they make while writing are harming their capacity for knowledge. Student writers tend to procrastinate and are forced into situations that reduce writing's positive effects.

Besides increasing intelligence, writing can treat psychological problems, such as high stress levels and drowsiness. While writing's ability to affect drowsiness has not been fully studied, both my interviewees and I have experienced times where the act of writing has kept us up late into the night. Writing's ability to cure stress, however, has been studied numerous times. Linda Cameron and Gregory Nicholls argued that writing not only decreased stress levels in subjects, but also increased GPAs. They unintentionally proved writing's academic purpose when studying its other effects, giving even more validity to their argument.

Through my research I have also come across an unlikely cure for writer's block: writing. Both my interviewees and I have experienced situations where the act of writing brought new ideas into our minds about what we were writing, thus saving us from hours spent trying to think of new ideas. I have since used this technique and have actually had new ideas about an entirely unrelated

project while writing. The trick is to make your mind forget about the other task and focus on the one at hand, which is stimulating to the mind and thus leads to epiphanies on unrelated subjects simply because of the increased brain activity.

I have found that through a subtle manipulation of the psyche, writing has the ability to do great things for intellectual capacity if we simply let it. No college student that I have talked to respects writing as such, though, and loses all the potential benefits therein. I have also had instructors and have heard about instructors who assign the most meaningless and redundant writing tasks to students. These not only have no use academically, but actually proceed to hinder the students' intelligence because the students become disrespectful of writing after a time. Further, pointless writing assignments fill time that could be used for assignments that do stimulate the mind to increase intellect.

Writing plays host to a whole spectrum of psychological phenomena that have the ability to affect the writers in a highly positive way. If students were taught to write with a respect for not only the craft itself, but also the power of the craft, it could lead to a new enlightenment during which writing is a tool for the advancement of society and thought. I have seen this power through my own experiences and those of the people I interviewed, and know that it is possible for writing to do amazing things, if only we let it.

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