

Opening up the Door to Positive Writing

Kathryn Britton, speaker in Symposium 19 at the CPPA Conference

Since I did not create Powerpoint slides for my presentation during Symposium 19, I'm submitting the script I wrote for myself. It's not word-for-word what happened. I ended up having 15 minutes plus questions instead of the 25 minutes I expected, so I could only cover experiments two and three. But readers may still find it useful to read about Experiment One.

Abstract submitted to the conference organizers:

Writing is a wonderful way to bring positive psychology to the world. Whether we want to write books, blogs, articles, proposals, or dissertations, being able to convey clear 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 as we try to write. Sometimes we sit with a blank piece of paper and no words come. Sometimes we fail to sit down at all. Sometimes we fear that we don't have anything new to say. Some of us hear disparaging voices from the past telling us that we can't write.

Come learn about approaches that help people liberate their voices, including a writers' workshop approach that brings people together to work on writing skills. The highly structured process is based on growth mindsets, positive relationships, and effective feedback. As authors, participants build skill and confidence that help them reach wider audiences. Many are surprised by the benefits they receive from being reviewers. Skills grow from practice and paying attention. Reviewers enhance their ability to give effective feedback, but they also grow their own writing skills by paying close attention to their own and other people's writing.

The writers' workshop process described by Richard Gabriel strongly leverages the strengths focus espoused by many positive psychology researchers, Carol Dweck's growth mindsets, and upward goal regulation following positive feedback (Seo & Remus, 2009). The approach is also based on work by Laura King and James Pennebaker work on the contribution of writing to well-being.

Research basis: The writers' workshop process described by Richard Gabriel strongly leverages the strengths focus espoused by many positive psychology researchers, Carol Dweck's growth mindsets, and upward goal regulation following positive feedback (Seo & Remus, 2009). The approach is also based on James Pennebaker's work on the contribution of writing to well-being.

Welcome writers!

Just a little bit about me, so you know why I'm here talking to you about writing

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 1000 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, LinkedIn posts, and online magazines. I've seen a number of ways that people get in their own way.

Finally, in the last three years, I've facilitated more than 200 writers' workshops with more than 30 authors and around 500 pieces of writing.

So I've seen a lot of writing come to be. Let me share some of what I've learned in the process.

Now let's explore why you are here, right now, in this room, to talk about writing.

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

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?

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 other face hard times with greater courage and resilience. Think of the stories you carry around in your head that help you face hardship well. You want to pay it forward.

You want to connect with clients who would benefit from your services.

You have an urge to write fiction that makes people sit up straighter and act more nobly.

So what's stopping you? [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.

One client still remembers her saying, "You'll never be able to write for beans." Fixed mindset, anyone?

Wondering if you have anything to say that hasn't already been said better by somebody else.

Overuse of humility, perhaps? The world needs important messages to be reinforced with different stories.

Judging every word as you write it so harshly that you feel like you've been 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?

You are not alone.

Christopher Peterson assigned Howard S. Becker's book about writing for the social sciences in one of my first MAPP classes. I love the way 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.

But now we are faced with a very different experience, writing that we really want to do. But we don't necessarily have the right habits and skills in place. Here are some of the ways it's different:

- We're much more expert on what we have to say. We have stories and accumulated wisdom that can make a difference in the world.
- We can write and then revise, so we don't HAVE to worry about making the first draft 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.

Want to write? Create experiments

Some of my clients feel as if they were facing a brick wall when it comes to writing. So if you are facing that wall, figure out a way to go under, over, around, or even through it. 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 three possible experiments, but I'm sure you could invent your own.

Experiment One: Let the ideas bubble up

Here is a technique that I learned from a writing professor, John Smith, who helped a group of us at IBM 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.
2. Set the timer for 10 minutes. 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, tryout 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 thing out. But save your outtakes. Perhaps they will appear in a different piece of writing.

Morals to Experiment One

Sometimes you have to open the way for ideas to emerge from your subconscious.

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

Experiment Two: Collect stories

As you go through your daily life, things are happening all around you.

You are having trouble getting your ideas onto paper? What makes it more difficult today? What approaches can you use to get past having a blank sheet in front of you? Did you reach for grit, or creativity, or ability to handle frustration? Perhaps that's a story.

Your best friend does something that makes you angry, but then the two of you work it out. Perhaps that's a story.

You make yourself finish something even when you want to be somewhere else. Did you experience conflicting desires, duty, obligation, fear of missing out? Perhaps that's a story.

You have a pleasant exchange in a grocery store line with a clerk about his interesting tattoo. Perhaps that's a story.

Keep a log of these ideas, which I'll call 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 writing out a story seed, making it sprout.

Morals to Experiment Two:

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

Capture possible stories regularly.

Experiment Three: Join or even create a Writers' Workshop

What if one of the best ways to learn how to write is to do it socially?

Poets know this. Even some software engineers know this.

I learned about writers' workshops when I worked at IBM, where we used this practice to review design patterns (and my favorite, design antipatterns – ideas that look like they should work, but don't)

It took me several years to get up the nerve to start my first writers' workshop in the fall of 2013. I finally figured if even engineers use workshops to get better at writing, perhaps workshops could help stymied experts of applied positive psychology. What finally got me going was thinking about it as an experiment.

Since then, I've facilitated nearly 200 workshop meetings with 30 different writer participants. We've reviewed close to 500 1-to-10 paged double-spaced writing samples. We've tried different days, different media, different group sizes, different durations, different review patterns. In fact, we keep experimenting.

Whether you want to join a group or start one, I recommend reading Richard Gabriel's [*Writers' Workshops, or the Work of Making Things.*](#)

What a wise book! Here are a few pieces of wisdom I learned from him:

- Writing is making things under risk.
- Making something is sweaty hard work filled with false starts and foolishness.
- Fear is at the center of concerns of writers and other risky makers.
- Many would-be writers pay more attention to the fear than the work
- Workshops help people shift the focus from the fear to the work.

Writers' workshops help people address fear. What if you could see your writing through the eyes of other people? What if you could see the impact it has on others? What if you could see what they like, often things you weren't even aware you were doing? What if you could see what makes them struggle or disengage, so you knew what really needed fixing rather than trying for perfection?

Writers' workshops are gift-based communities that make this possible.

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 a book or blog post 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, it can be a statement of the major theme, it can be a discussion of the 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 were particularly eloquent. 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. So 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.

Quoting Richard Gabriel: "I kept thinking that having my own poems discussed would help me more, but now I realize that I learned much more from both the preparation and in the actual workshop discussions." So the time spent giving to others is also a gift to yourself.

Morals of Experiment Three:

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 your own writing and other people's writing.

Learning how to explain what makes a piece of writing strong is often new to people. It's a great exercise of positive psychology!

Conclusion

So 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, and Andrew Brady for telling me what it said to them, pointing out parts that they found particularly powerful, and suggesting ways to make it stronger, such as moving my experience numbers to the beginning and highlighting the intersections with positive psychology.