



Write On

You don't have to be a professional writer to experience the benefits of putting pen to paper

*By the Book Don't know what to write about? Los Angeles writing coach Marilyn Friedman recommends a book of writing prompts, *A Writer's Book of Days: A Spirited Companion and Lively Muse for the Writing Life* by Judy Reeves.*

YOU REMEMBER THE FIVE-PARAGRAPH ESSAYS from high school and still have nightmares about those 10-page college term papers. Back then, a writing assignment was often a laborious task to bemoan. Even now, as adults, writing is often associated with work—reports, memorandums and e-mails.

But it doesn't have to be all work and no play. Writing can even be therapeutic—a way to connect with others and with your own emotions. In that respect, the pen is mightier than a lot of things. Here are five steps toward harnessing its power.

1. Realize the power of the arts.

"I think that any artistic outlet has a therapeutic aspect to it, especially for people whose day job might not include any creative activity," says Marilyn Friedman, a writing teacher who opened Writing Pad, a Los Angeles writing school, two years ago.

Being able to transfer your feelings to words is a way to vent stress, explore sadness or express happiness. Whether you're composing a story or writing in your journal, you can benefit from the release.

"Writing, in part, gives you an outlet to express yourself," Friedman says. "It also can be like meditation in a way."

2. Stop thinking like your eighth-grade teacher.

Many of us can remember a time in our lives when a teacher made us feel about an inch tall. Maybe you were told you weren't a good writer or you recall all of your papers oozing red ink. Those experiences could still be affecting you, writing coaches warn.

"Writing can be scary and stressful—that's the other side of the art," Friedman says. "People put a lot of pressure on themselves." The more you focus on details and mechanics, the harder it is to experience the therapeutic benefits.

To avoid the self-critic in your head, focus on the meaning of your words and the way you feel when you express yourself. Forget about perfect punctuation or subject-verb agreement, and just let the words flow.

3. Diffuse writer's block.

If you find the blank page stressful or intimidating, don't be put off. Start with a comfortable physical space, Friedman suggests. "When you sit down to write, so many things can distract you—sitting in a hard chair or someone running a lawn mower," she says. "I take the phone off the hook, sit in a space with a nice view, put on music and light a candle."

Once you're relaxed, there are plenty of exercises to help you get started. "I think writing is a way that everyone can connect," says Janet Tanguay, a creativity and life coach and owner of Art-N-Soul, Inc. in New York. "Everyone can write and has a story to tell. We have techniques to draw people out."

Friedman reminds people to focus on the enjoyment of writing. "Set a timer and write for 10 minutes with no censoring," she says. Or engage in list exercises: Make a list of people you admire or your most memorable kisses. Then pick something from the list to write about.

4. Find a group.

While writing is personal, you might benefit from joining a group. Both Tanguay and Friedman coach writers through the creative process and see a benefit in working with a group.

"It's fun to share your thoughts and express yourself with other people," Friedman says. "But it needs to be a space where you can share." Both coaches say it's critical to find a group that doesn't allow criticism, so you can be free to create.

"The beautiful thing about the expressive arts is that they're nonjudgmental," Tanguay says. "Traditional art therapy looks at a painting, sees the color red and assumes the person is angry. Expressive art therapy says, 'What does red mean to you?' It could be passion or love. No one else can tell you what your artwork means."



5. Don't worry about getting published ... yet.

While you may feel your writing isn't "valid" unless it's published, remember that writing really can simply be about a personal creative release.

"I'm all for writers trying to get their work published or to share their work at a reading, but when you enter that process, it can be very critical," Friedman warns.

To focus on the therapeutic benefits of writing, consider these forms of expression:

- + Write letters to friends to let them know how much you miss them.
- + Write a letter to express anger—but don't mail it. Find an alternative way to resolve the issue.
- + Keep a journal.
- + Start a blog.
- + Write a children's story.

And don't forget to reward yourself—writing is hard work. After you've written, get a massage, splurge on a dessert or go see a movie. "It's about being kind to yourself and turning it into something fun," Friedman says. —By Stephanie Conner



Feeling
Artsy?

Writing is one way to connect with your feelings and with others, but it's not the only one. Consider these other forms of artistic expression:

- + Paint a portrait
- + Design a sculpture
- + Take a snapshot
- + Create a mosaic
- + Write a song