

# Using Writing to Manage Stress

## PURPOSE

Expressing your thoughts and feelings in writing and reflecting purposefully on what you've written can improve your ability to cope with challenges and manage stress, ultimately helping you understand and find meaning in your experiences. Use this technique to organize your thoughts, identify and address your feelings, and learn to see experiences from multiple perspectives.

## HOW TO DO IT

### Step 1. Disregard these common misconceptions.

*Misconception: You need to know what you want to say before you start writing.*

Reality: You may not be able to predict or plan what you write, and that is okay.

*Misconception: Telling the truth is dangerous.*

Reality: You are free to keep what you write private, which means that telling the truth is safe. Furthermore, telling the truth is necessary to benefit from this work.

*Misconception: You must suffer to write well.*

Reality: You may write about painful topics; in that case, you are likely to see the experience from a new angle and ultimately lessen your suffering. Of course, you may also write about pleasant or neutral topics.

*Misconception: You are not allowed to ask for help.*

Reality: You are absolutely allowed to ask for help! Members of the KSU community can seek help from many resources including the KSU Writing Center and Counseling and Psychological Services.

### Step 2. Write expressively about both facts AND your feelings about those facts.

- Write honestly; unless you *choose* to share your writing, only you will ever see it.
- Allow imperfection; don't be concerned with proper grammar or spelling.

Facts	Feelings			
Actual events	Anger	Empathy	Happiness	Regret
Your actions/the actions of others	Anxiety	Excitement	Jealousy	Sadness
Your words/other people's words	Belonging	Fear	Joy	Shame
	Curiosity	Frustration	Loneliness	Surprise
	Disappointment	Gratitude	Love	Vulnerability
	Embarrassment	Grief	Overwhelm	Worry

### Step 3. Reflect in writing on what you have written.

- Use "I" to center the experience on yourself.
- Use past tense to describe how you felt and present tense to show how that feeling has changed: *I understood \_\_\_\_\_; now I understand \_\_\_\_\_.*
- Complete these sentence stems as you reflect on your writing. *As I read what I have written,*
  - *I notice \_\_\_\_\_.*
  - *it surprises me that \_\_\_\_\_.*
  - *it pleases me that \_\_\_\_\_.*
  - *it concerns me that \_\_\_\_\_.*
  - *I wonder \_\_\_\_\_.*

## KEYWORDS AND PHRASES TO HELP YOU REFLECT

arose from	ended when	believe	hope	realize
became relevant for	happened when	expect	know	understand
began after	resulted from	feel	question	wonder

**Remember: feelings can change—but only with time AND reflection. Often, writers’ initial responses include disempowering words; their written reflections tend to be more empowering.**

### PUTTING IT INTO PRACTICE

#### Exercise 1: 5-Minute Freewrite + Reflection

Write without stopping for five minutes following this one rule: don't stop until you hear the timer. You may want to consider the following as you begin:

- How do you feel about doing this exercise?
- Describe a powerful moment you recently experienced.
- Write about a challenge you are facing or a challenge that you recently faced.

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#### Exercise 2: Pongo Poem<sup>1</sup> + Reflection

Fill in the blanks below to write your own poem. After you’ve written your poem, read over it. Notice themes and your reactions to what you’ve written. Then, write a reflective note for up to five minutes.

Poem title: Taking First Steps, by \_\_\_\_\_ (your name)

The first step can be the longest

When you want to \_\_\_\_\_ (give up alcohol, break up with someone, ???)

The first step can be the most challenging

When you fear \_\_\_\_\_ (failure, hurting someone you care about, ???)

The first step can be the hardest

When you fight against \_\_\_\_\_ (your need to forget, a desire to take the easy way out, ???)

The first step is often the loneliest

When you don't know if \_\_\_\_\_ (friends will reject you, family will blame you, ???)

The first step can be an opening

Where the possibilities include \_\_\_\_\_ (a healthier life, new relationships, ???)

The first step can be an ending

When you think you will lose \_\_\_\_\_ (independence, the courage of your will, ???)

The first step can be a joy

When you celebrate \_\_\_\_\_ (sobriety, a new life on your own, ???)

### FINAL THOUGHTS

Some people feel better equipped to manage stress after a single writing/reflecting session while others notice a difference only after several sessions. Just remember that you don’t have to write or reflect alone: the [KSU Writing Center](#) and [KSU Counseling and Psychological Services](#) are here to help.

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<sup>1</sup> Gold, Richard. “Taking First Steps.” Pongo Teen Writing, 2009, [www.pongoteenwriting.org](http://www.pongoteenwriting.org)