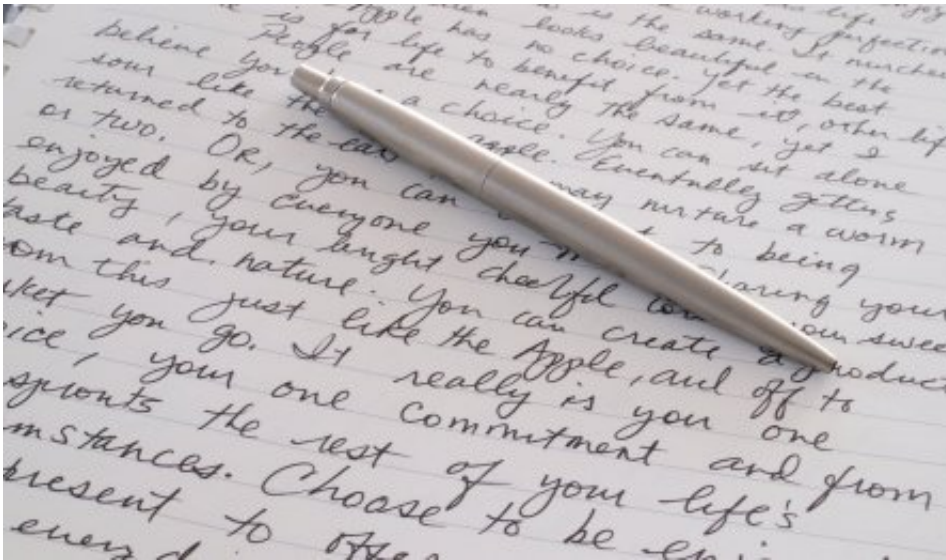


# Self-esteem affects the benefits of writing about bias

March 9 2018, by Bert Gambini

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Credit: University at Buffalo

We don't have to spend two years at Walden Pond to appreciate the benefits of expressive autobiographical writing. Thinking about Thoreau's classic and the insights he shared, however, speaks to what research has shown to be the benefits of this type of writing, even when the writing is a completely private exercise, not meant for an audience.

Expressive autobiographical writing is similar to journaling, but isn't necessarily a long-term endeavor. It helps organize thoughts, aids in the search for meaning and can place events within a life's context – and

there are documented [health benefits](#) that can accompany how this contributes to a writer's psychological well-being.

But the practice isn't always constructive and a University at Buffalo researcher has published a new study in the journal *Personality and Individual Differences* that looks closely at the factors that might influence the benefits of expressive writing.

"Whether this is beneficial or harmful, at least in the short term, seemed to depend on the level of self-esteem when people began writing," says Melanie Green, an associate professor in UB's Department of Communication. "For some people we discovered the typical results. Writing was good and brought out positive emotions, but for other people this experience actually was negative and dragged them back to a painful event."

The painful event in Green's research is bias, the focus of her study with Geoff Kaufman, an assistant professor at Carnegie Mellon University, Mary Flanagan, a professor at Dartmouth College, and Kaitlin Fitzgerald, a UB graduate student.

The researchers asked 215 participants to write about a time in their lives when someone treated or judged them differently based on something about the individual writer. The group had 48 hours to think about the bias-related event and then to write continuously about it for 10 minutes. Afterward, participants completed an emotional assessment to gauge their reaction to the writing task.

"If you had people who felt good about themselves they were able to write about this event and doing so was a more empowering experience," says Green, an expert in story-telling and the power of narrative. "But for people coming in feeling down about themselves, writing about this event was a negative experience, one more reminder of the struggles

faced and why life wasn't good for them."

Green's research is distinct from previous studies on expressive writing in that it was centered on bias-related events and participants wrote only once as opposed to longer writing sessions over several days.

"This research shows how the experience of writing is not necessarily equally beneficial for everyone, some that both clinicians and writers might want to be aware of," she says. "In our case we looked at the short-term perspective, but this certainly opens the door for possible further research looking at more long-term measures."

Provided by University at Buffalo

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