Fall 2021

The Benefits of Using Expressive Writing in the First-Year Writing Classroom During the COVID-19 Pandemic and Beyond

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By

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B.A., Governors State University, 2018

Thesis

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements

For the degree of Master of Arts,

With a Major in English

Governors State University

University Park, IL 60446

2021

Acknowledgments

I would like to thank my advisor, Dr. Kerri Morris, for her endless patience and guidance through the research and writing process. I could not have completed this thesis—or made it through 2020—without her pep talks, encouragement, and kindness. I would also like to thank the members of my committee, Dr. Bradley Smith and Dr. Christopher White, for their assistance throughout the writing process, for taking the time to read my thesis and provide me with feedback. The insightful suggestions and encouragement I have received from my entire committee has meant the world to me. I would also like to thank both Dr. Morris and Dr. Smith for the opportunities to work as both a Writing Fellow and as Graduate Assistant to the First-year Writing Program at GSU.

Additionally, I would like to thank my closest friends, Sara and Helen, for their love, support, and encouragement.

Finally, I would like to thank Taylor Swift for providing the soundtrack to the research and writing of this thesis. Swift has said if you write, you can turn your lessons into your legacy. I believe without a doubt this is true. I hope writing this thesis—and expressive writing—will help me and others turn our lessons into a beautiful legacy.

Table of Contents

Abstract

This thesis examines the ways in which expressive writing helps individuals process trauma, and, specifically, how the implementation of expressive writing exercises into the first-year writing classroom might positively benefit university students. It begins with an in-depth exploration of previous expressive writing studies and an analysis of the ways in which expressive writing provides physical and emotional benefits and assists in the processing of trauma. This thesis additionally examines the traumatic impact of COVID-19 on the global population and how expressive writing might serve to assist in the processing of this trauma. Finally, I put forth the thesis offers suggestions as to the ways expressive writing might specifically be integrated into the first-year writing classroom at the university level following the COVID-19 pandemic in order to help students both process the impact of the pandemic as well as assist in student success in the first-year writing classroom and throughout their academic careers.

Introduction

In the aftermath of an emotional upheaval, upsetting experience, or a traumatic event, many people may find themselves inclined to speak with others about the event. The natural impulse to reach out motivates people to talk about the traumatic experience as well as their emotional response to and feelings surrounding the incident, in order to find support in a time of need as they work through their own feelings. The proclivity many have to discuss an upsetting or traumatic experience, however, is not always possible to act upon, for a variety of reasons. Individuals may choose to keep a traumatic event and their emotions regarding their trauma to themselves due to feelings of shame or guilt surrounding the event-- for example, someone who has been sexually assaulted may experience feelings of shame that keep them from discussing their trauma, while an individual who has engaged in illegal or illicit activities may refrain from discussing their experiences due to feelings of guilt-- or due to fear of repercussions if they disclose details of an event or experience (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). There are other reasons people may not discuss a traumatic experience, as well. Individuals may also refrain from discussing a trauma if they feel unable to process their own emotions. Furthermore, people may not talk about a traumatic experience with those they would normally discuss emotional topics with if they feel those people, too, are in an emotionally fragile or volatile state. While the effort to keep from overwhelming those who are already struggling, or to keep from adding to their struggles, oftentimes comes from a place of good will, it nevertheless has negative consequences, as it causes individuals dealing with a trauma to process both the event and the resulting emotions by themselves.

The emotional upheaval of the COVID-19 pandemic is one such instance in which people may be struggling with both processing and coping with their own emotions, yet may at the same

time feel unable to reach out to others for support. Unlike traumatic events that impact only those directly involved, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a worldwide negative impact. In the United States alone, one-third of adults reported feeling high levels of psychological distress at some point during the period of social distancing (Keeter, 2020). Among those most likely to experience psychological distress are women, young people, those who have mental illness including anxiety disorders, and those who are low income or have lost their jobs due to the pandemic (Keeter, 2020, Berkowitz, 2020). Because the COVID-19 pandemic is a global health crisis, nearly everyone is negatively affected. As such, many people may not vent their emotions to those they would normally discuss stressful or upsetting topics with, as they know those closest to them-- and people all around the world-- are likely struggling as well.

No matter the reason an individual may have for keeping their emotions to themselves, research demonstrates that expressive writing is beneficial when it comes to processing emotions surrounding a traumatic event (Pennebaker, 1997). Expressive writing refers to the act of writing freely about a traumatic experience and has been found to be helpful for those dealing with trauma (Pennebaker, 1997). Not only does expressive writing allow an outlet for individuals to process difficult or complex emotions on their own, but research has shown it also has lasting emotional and physical benefits (Pennebaker, 1997). Expressive writing is a helpful method in instances wherein individuals may feel they cannot talk to anyone openly about their experiences or emotions.

My own interest in expressive writing as a tool for processing trauma began long before the COVID-19 pandemic, and, indeed, long before I was aware of the research behind the practice, or even the name for the practice. As a writer, I have long found it helpful to write about my emotions, whether in the form of journaling, writing poetry, or creating short pieces of

fiction based around an experience or emotion. In doing so, I have found the process of writing about my emotions—and, in particular, writing about my emotions in the aftermath of a traumatic event I was unable to discuss with anyone else—to be extremely helpful in my own healing process. When beginning to consider a topic for my thesis, I found myself drawn to learning more about why writing was helpful to me when it came to processing trauma, and to learning about how writing might help others do the same. At Governors State University, I have been lucky enough to work with other students on their writing as a Writing Fellow, a Supplemental Instructor, and as the Graduate Assistant to the First-year Writing Program. Through this process, I have discovered how important it is to me to be able to help others, especially when it comes to writing. I hoped that in learning more about why writing about trauma was helpful and how it might be helpful to others, I might eventually be able to share this knowledge with others in order to provide even better assistance. It seemed only natural to combine my love of writing, my interest in how writing is beneficial to the process of healing from trauma, and my hope to be able to help others into my thesis research.

Early in the stages of my research, two things happened in very quick succession. First, the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread rapidly worldwide, leading to shelter-in-place orders and the closure of many locations, including Governors State University, as the global health crisis led to hospitals becoming overwhelmed and rising numbers of people becoming infected with and dying from the disease. As cases of infections rapidly rose, so too did fears and anxieties surrounding the disease. At the same time, I broke my dominant arm, including a spiral fracture of my humerus, which led to additional extensive damage to my radial nerve. As a result I developed radial nerve palsy, a condition that caused me to lose feeling in and function of my right arm and hand, lengthening an already extensive recovery time.

Prior to these two health crises—one global, and one very personal—while I had frequently turned to writing as a method of working through my feelings, I had never realized just how much I relied on the process of writing to help myself heal. As my own fears surrounding the pandemic grew, as I struggled with my injury, and as I found myself increasingly lonely, frightened, and depressed, I also found myself unable to turn to the one method I otherwise would have because I was unable to physically write—and unable to type with any ease—for well over a year. In fact, there was a period of time in which it was uncertain that I would be able to use my dominant hand again.

Fortunately, I am healing from my injury. And while the COVID-19 pandemic is still very much a concern at the time of this writing, the creation and implementation of vaccines that prevent the contraction of the virus or, if the virus is still contracted, greatly reduce the severity of symptoms, have greatly improved the situation. As a result, not only have I been able to resume work on my thesis—and my own expressive writing exercises to help me work through my feelings about the past months—but many places are beginning to open again. With measures being taken to ensure safety, many schools and universities, including GSU, have reopened for in-person classes once more. Although students are once again on campus, fears surrounding the pandemic, and the trauma of having lived through the crisis for the past year and a half, are continuing to impact many students and continually contributing to struggles both in and out of the classroom.

As previously stated, young people are among those most likely to experience psychological distress in regards to the COVID-19 pandemic (Keeter, 2020). A study conducted by the Pew Research Center found one third of adults ages 18-29 are in the high distress group in regards to their psychological reaction to the COVID-19 pandemic, in contrast with the 15% of

adults aged 65 years and older who are in the high distress group (Keeter, 2020). The majority of first-year writing students-- including many non-traditional students-- fall into the age range of 18-29, and are therefore at a high risk of experiencing psychological distress due to COVID-19. The high risk of emotional distress as a result of the pandemic in conjunction with the challenges of beginning college may lead to further difficulty for first-year writing students.

Any pandemic-related distress negatively impacting first-year university students has contributed to an already concerning rise in mental health struggles of students. In the spring of 2021, The Healthy Minds Study found 41 % of students screened positive for depression and 34% screened positive for anxiety, the highest levels since Healthy Minds began conducting surveys in 2007, and these numbers have also been on the rise for years (Brown, 2021). Although student mental health has been declining for some time, the COVID-19 pandemic has had a notable negative impact on students. According to the Healthy Minds study, while most students who reported seeking counseling did not do so for pandemic-related reasons, two-thirds of students did report that COVID-19 had affected their mental health (Brown, 2021).

Additionally, a CDC survey found 62.9% of 18–24-year-olds reported anxiety or depression, while a quarter of those surveyed in this age group reported using more drugs and alcohol to cope with stress related to COVID-19 (Wallis, 2020). A quarter of younger people also reported seriously considering suicide (Wallis, 2020). The same age group also reported acute distress and depression at three points between mid-March and mid-April of 2020 (Wallis, 2020). In other words, the mental health of college students, and all people between the ages of 18-24, has been declining for several years, and first-year university students are both in a higher risk group to be negatively affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, and have often reported feeling as though COVID-19 has severely negatively impacted their mental health. Notably, however,

student mental health was declining prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, and, if the trend continues, will continue to decline even after the pandemic. As such, expressive writing might benefit students at any time, not only amidst and immediately following the COVID-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, typical concerns experienced by first-year university students are only exacerbated by the pandemic. First-year students have reported concerns about being around people, and in a classroom setting, again for the first time in months (Brown, 2021). The usual fears about making friends and passing classes are, for many new university students, compounded by fears of rusty social skills and uncertainty about classes, in addition to concerns regarding COVID-19. With all of this in mind, it is unsurprising that many first-year university students may find themselves struggling in a variety of ways.

Due to the emotional benefits of expressive writing, I suggest implementing expressive writing exercises into the first-year writing classroom to assist students not only in processing their emotions regarding the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, but also working through their feelings regarding college. In assisting students in processing their emotions, the integration of expressive writing exercises into the first-year writing classroom may help students succeed throughout their academic careers and beyond.

This thesis explores the benefits of expressive writing and its potential to specifically help first-year writing students in a post-COVID-19 classroom. In the first chapter, I explain the concept of expressive writing. This chapter delves into the origins of expressive writing, and discusses the methodology of early expressive writing studies, as well as results of these studies. The second chapter of this thesis examines the physical, psychological, and behavioral benefits of expressive writing. The second chapter also explores why expressive writing has positive

effects, and who benefits most from engaging in expressive writing. The third chapter of this thesis examines the traumatic impact of COVID-19. This chapter also demonstrates why now may be an ideal time to write about feelings associated with COVID-19 in order to benefit from processing those emotions. Additionally, the third chapter addresses early research into expressive writing and COVID-19. The fourth chapter outlines ways to prepare for expressive writing exercises in the first-year writing classroom. Finally, the fifth chapter of this thesis puts forth suggestions for the ways in which expressive writing might be implemented in the first-year writing classroom. This chapter includes methods for constructing prompts, suggested prompts, and suggested instructions. The fifth chapter also includes resources for students who wish to engage in expressive writing exercises at home.

The overall goal of this thesis is to examine the benefits of expressive writing as a method of processing trauma in conjunction with the traumatic impact of COVID-19, and to suggest methods that may be utilized in the first-year writing classroom that may be beneficial to university students.

Chapter I: Expressive Writing

The term “expressive writing” may take on an entirely different meaning depending on who is using it, or the discipline in which it is being discussed. Typically, expressive writing in the field of rhetoric and composition is related to expressivist theory.

In “Contemporary Composition: The Major Pedagogical Theories,” James Berlin analyzes the act of teaching writing according to a set of interactions among four elements, often presented as a triangle, that constitute a rhetorical act: writer, audience, message, and language (Burnham, 2001). Expressivism places the writer at the center of this triangle (Burnham, 2001). In doing so, expressivism further articulates its theory and develops its pedagogical system by assigning the most importance to the writer (Burnham, 2001).

One way in which expressivist pedagogy assigns importance to the writer is in asserting the importance of the writer’s individual identity, and their ability to communicate their ideas while maintaining that identity. In order to effectively communicate, it is necessary for an individual to express themselves (Britton, 1997). Expressive writing, in this sense, is the closest form of written discourse to ordinary speech, as it is the closest form of discourse allowing individuals to express themselves in their own unique voice through writing (Britton, 1997; Burnham & Powell, 2014). Expressivist pedagogy encourages students to use their own language in order to make meaning and create identity (Burnham & Powell, 2014). As such, expressivist pedagogy frequently utilizes methods such as freewriting, journaling, and reflective writing (Burnham, 2001; Burnham & Powell, 2014).

It is noteworthy that expressive writing allows writers to use their own language and maintain their own voice and identity through writing. In Romancing Rhetorics: Social Expressivist Perspectives on the Teaching of Writing, Sherrie Gardin notes that expressivists in

rhetoric value the autonomy of writers, a fact that is signaled in their desire to empower people through voice (Burnham & Powell, 2014). This notion is echoed by both bell hooks and Thomas Merton, who accept the responsibility to be passionate and to develop socially and morally aware citizens whose actions are rooted in mutual respect; these goals, too, are shared by expressivists such as Rebecca Powell, Kevin Davis, and Chris Burnham, who hope to help students become morally aware members of society through the work of self-reflective, expressivist writing (Burnham & Powell, 2014).

In other words, expressive writing in the field of rhetoric centers the writer, encourages writers to use their own language instead of focusing on using academic language, and is concerned with making meaning and utilizing identity through the act of writing. Each of these aspects were also used in expressive writing experiments conducted outside of the field of rhetoric and composition, which themselves support the notions surrounding the importance of expressive writing.

The first expressive writing experiment was conducted in 1983 at Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas, by Dr. James Pennebaker, a professor of psychology, and graduate student Sandra Beall. Forty-six undergraduate volunteers were recruited from introductory psychology classes for course credit, with the stipulation that any volunteer was welcome to withdraw from the experiment at any time and still receive full course credit for taking part in the experiment (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986). Volunteers arrived at the lab individually, where they were instructed to write for fifteen minutes a day on four consecutive days while in an individual cubicle located in the psychology building at Southern Methodist University (Pennebaker, 1997). In order to preserve the anonymity of students, all participants in the experiment were asked to put a code number, rather than their names, at the tops of the four

essays and the follow-up questionnaires (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall 1986). Participants were further afforded the option of not turning in the essays they wrote at the end of the experiment, and instead keeping them entirely to themselves (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall 1986). Following these instructions, students were randomly assigned to one of four writing groups:

- Control Group: Students assigned to the Control Group were asked to write about mundane or trivial topics over the course of the experiment.
- Trauma-Emotion Cell: Students assigned to the Trauma-Emotion Cell were asked to write about the most traumatic event of their lives; specifically, they were asked to vent about their emotions regarding the traumatic event they chose.
- Trauma-Fact Cell: Students assigned to the Trauma-Fact Cell were asked to write only about the facts of the traumatic event, without referring to their emotions regarding said event.
- Trauma-Combination Cell: Students assigned to the Trauma-Combination group were asked to write about both the facts of the most traumatic event of their lives as well as their feelings about the event. (Pennebaker 1997; Pennebaker & Beall, 1986).

Students assigned to the Trauma-Combination Cell were given the following instructions:

> Once you are escorted into the writing cubicle and the door is closed, I want you to write continuously about the most upsetting or traumatic experience of your entire life. Don't worry about grammar, spelling, or sentence structure. In your writing, I want you to discuss your deepest thoughts and feelings about the experience. You can write about anything you want. But whatever you choose, it should be something that has affected you very deeply. Ideally, it should be about something you have not talked about with

> others in detail. It is critical, however, that you let yourself go and touch those deepest emotions and thoughts that you have. In other words, write about what happened and how you felt about it, and how you feel about it now. Finally, you can write on different traumas during each session or the same one over the entire study. Your choice of trauma for each session is entirely up to you (Pennebaker 1997).

Similar instructions were given to the Trauma-Emotion Cell, whose group members were asked to write specifically about their emotions regarding the most traumatic event of their lives. However, students assigned to the Trauma-Emotion Cell were further instructed not to directly mention the trauma they had experienced, but rather to write only about their emotions at the time, and their emotions now (Pennebaker, 1997). In contrast, volunteers assigned to the Trauma-Fact Cell were instructed to describe the traumatic event in detail, but asked to refrain from referring to their emotions surrounding the trauma at the time or afterward (Pennebaker, 1997).

The final group, the Control Group, was, as previously mentioned, given trivial topics to write about during the time of the experiment. Students assigned to the Control Group were asked to write about things such as a description of their dorm room, or to write in detail about the shoes they were wearing (Pennebaker, 1997). That is, while all of the student volunteers assigned to a Trauma Cell were asked to write about the most traumatic event of their lives to some degree, students assigned to the Control Group were not asked to write about trauma or emotion at all, but rather to spend the time writing about something simple and mundane.

On the final day of this first expressive writing study, student volunteers met with both Pennebaker and Beall for an interview, during which time they discussed their experience in the writing experiment, as well as their feelings about the process as a whole (Pennebaker, 1997).

Following this interview on the final day of the writing experiment, students did not hear from either Pennebaker or Beall until four months later, at which time they were asked to complete a questionnaire which aimed to measure their long-term feelings about the experiment (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall 1986). Additionally, student visits to the campus health center were compared with the groups who had taken part in the expressive writing experiment (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall 1986).

In the months prior to the expressive writing experiment conducted by Pennebaker and Beall, student volunteers across each of the assigned groups went to the student health center for illness at similar rates; however, those who participated in the experiment as part of the Trauma-Combination Cell went to the campus health center far less in the months following the experiment (Pennebaker, 1997). In fact, following the experiment, participants who had written about their deepest thoughts and feelings regarding a trauma went to the campus health center fewer than 0.5 times, which was a 50% drop in the previous monthly visitation rate (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Beall 1986). In contrast, students who wrote about only their emotions regarding a traumatic event, only the facts of a traumatic event, or about a superficial topic unrelated to a traumatic event visited the campus health center about 1.5 times per person (Pennebaker, 1997). These results suggested an association between improved health and expressive writing, and specifically suggested writing about one's deepest thoughts and feelings related to a traumatic event might continue to have positive health benefits for months following the writing exercise.

The questionnaires filled out by participants following the study revealed similar results, as student volunteers reported improved mood, more positive outlook, and greater physical health following their participation in the expressive writing experiment (Pennebaker, 1997).

Thus, not only were students who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding a traumatic experience as part of the experiment likely to show improved health, they also reported feeling better emotionally, as well.

Louise DeSalvo, author and professor of English at Hunter College, concurs with these findings. According to DeSalvo, "writing that describes traumatic or distressing events in detail and how we felt about these events then and feel about them now is the only kind of writing about trauma that clinically has been associated with improved health" (DeSalvo, 2000). While both physical and mental health cannot be improved solely by describing trauma or venting emotions, writing about trauma in conjunction with our feelings about that particular trauma can yield the aforementioned positive results (DeSalvo, 2000).

Following Pennebaker and Beall's initial experiment, a new experiment was conducted in order to further study and analyze the possible connections between expressive writing and physical health. The study was conducted by Pennebaker in conjunction with clinical psychologist Janice K. Kiecolt-Claser and her husband, immunologist Ronald Glaser, both of whom were a part of the Ohio State University College of Medicine. The second experiment was very similar to the initial experiment, with several changes made in order to narrow focus and gather new and additional information. In this new expressive writing experiment, fifty students were asked to write for twenty minutes a day for four consecutive days. However, this time, students were divided into two groups, rather than the original four groups: One group of twenty-five students was asked to write about their deepest feelings regarding a traumatic experience in their lives, while the second group of twenty-five students was asked to write about a superficial topic, thus acting as the control group (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glasser, & Glaser, 1988). Additionally, students taking part in this second experiment had their blood drawn

on three occasions: the day prior to the beginning of the experiment, after the last writing session, and six weeks after the final writing session (Pennebaker, 1997).

The results of this blood work showed people who wrote about their deepest thoughts and feelings surrounding a trauma evidenced heightened immune function in comparison to those who had written about superficial topics, thus further confirming the apparent health benefits of expressive writing (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glasser, & Glaser, 1988). In addition, not only did health center visits for illnesses drop for those who wrote about trauma in comparison to those who wrote about mundane topics, but these benefits, while most pronounced after the final day of writing, tended to persist for six weeks following the study (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glasser, & Glaser, 1988). In other words, the addition of studying bloodwork of students following their participation in this second experiment showed that writing about a traumatic experience and one's emotions regarding that experience improved immune function both immediately following the writing exercise, and for up to six weeks following the exercise, as well.

These first two expressive writing experiments not only indicated that writing about traumatic experiences was beneficial to people, but that the way in which people wrote about a trauma was a factor, as well. Following these experiments, Pennebaker noted, "all indications suggested that the effects were not due to simple catharsis or the venting of pent-up emotions," but rather that the process of describing a traumatic event and one's emotional response to said trauma had lasting benefits to individuals' mental and physical health (Pennebaker, 1997). The idea that writing about trauma was beneficial was further supported by additional surveys sent out to participants several months following the second experiment, in which participants were asked about long-term effects they felt they had experienced following engaging in

expressive writing (Pennebaker, 1997). Participants described their experience positively, with 80% of respondents writing that they felt they understood themselves better following the study (Pennebaker, 1997). That is to say, in addition to health benefits, participants in the writing experiment who then went on the complete the survey reported feeling that one of the benefits of taking part in expressive writing was not that they were able to vent their negative emotions, but that writing about those emotions helped them to better process and understand their emotions, their reaction to a trauma, and themselves.

Students reporting on the fact that writing expressively helped them understand themselves better aligns with the notion of cognitive change theory, which suggests traumatic memories that are not organized into a narrative structure may be stored in the mind as sensory perceptions, obsessional ruminations, or behavioral reenactments similar to behaviors associated with OCD and PTSD (Smyth & Pennebaker, 2008; Smyth, True, and Sotto, 2001; Smyth, Hockemeyer, & Tulloch, 2008; Danoff-Burg, Mosher, Seawell & Agee, 2011). The reason for these obsessive thoughts or sensory perceptions may be related to the disorganized nature of one's thoughts following a traumatic event; however, creating a coherent narrative may help both organize and transform memories of a trauma, helping individuals make meaning and thus reduce stress and improve both physical and mental health as a result (Klein & Boals, 2001; Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997; Danoff-Burg, Mosher, Seawell & Agee, 2011). Indeed, when individuals transform their emotions and thoughts about trauma into written language, their physical and mental health often improve (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Thus, the process of writing expressively does a great deal more than allowing for a space to express emotions; expressive writing is beneficial to both the physical and mental health of participants, as it allows

them to organize their thoughts and feelings about trauma into a coherent narrative, therefore allowing them to process the trauma.

Following the revelation that expressive writing is beneficial to physical and mental health, a new study sought to discover whether the same process might benefit those who were not university students. In January of 1991, approximately 100 senior engineers with an average age of 52 at a Dallas computer company, most of whom had been with the company following their college graduations, had been terminated during layoffs without the possibility of rehire (Pennebaker, 1997). Six months following this event, Pennebaker, along with Stefanie Spera, a psychologist with an outplacement company—a service which exists to help terminated individuals secure new employment--, and Eric Buhrfiend, a graduate student, interviewed almost half of these men and invited them to participate in a writing study (Pennebaker, 1997). In this instance, all of the men shared the same trauma, as the loss of a job is one of the top traumatic life experiences one can face; in fact, job loss for middle-aged workers and periods of lengthy unemployment have negative effects on physical and mental health, as well (Ivancevich & Matteson, 1984; Quick & Quick, 1984). Although Pennebaker noted the bitterness and hostility of the men, he also noted their willingness to take part in anything that might ultimately help them find new jobs (Pennebaker, 1997). With that, a new study in expressive writing began.

The men were asked to write for thirty minutes a day for five consecutive days (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker, Spera, & Buhrfiend, 1994). Once more, the study was divided into multiple groups: one group was asked to write about their deepest thoughts and feelings about being fired from their previous positions, while the other was asked to write about how they used their time now that they were unemployed; a third, control group consisting of twenty-two of these men, did not write at all in order to serve as a comparison to the rest of the study

(Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker, Spera, & Buhrfiend, 1994). While the concept of this experiment was similar to those conducted with college students, one immediate effect differed: unlike studies conducted with college students as participants, these men reported feeling better immediately after writing each day (Pennebaker, 1997). While college students often reported initially feeling worse immediately after writing, but feeling better shortly thereafter, these men in contrast felt an immediate improvement in their mood following a writing session.

The rest of the results reported success as well. Within three months of the writing experiment, 27% of the men who wrote about their deepest feelings surrounding the layoffs had secured new employment, a contrast to the less than 5% in the time-management group and the group that did not write at all (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker, Spera, & Buhrfiend, 1994). Several months later, all of the men involved in the study had gone to the same number of job interviews; however, 53% of the men who had been asked to write about their thoughts and feelings had secured employment following these interviews, compared to 18% of the men in the other conditions (Pennebaker, 1997). It appeared taking part in expressive writing had helped these men in their search for employment, but researchers were left wondering how exactly expressive writing had been of benefit in this endeavor.

Ultimately, Pennebaker, Spera, and Buhrfiend believe the answer lies in the nature of anger, as the men who had written about their emotions were also more likely to come to terms with their feelings of anger and hostility towards their previous employer, making them therefore less likely to talk about how they had been treated unfairly in job interviews when asked about previous employment (Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker, Spera, & Buhrfiend, 1994). Because the men felt they had worked through their anger in their writing, they explained they were less likely to display anger or agitation in regard to their previous job loss. The fact that the men were

less likely to display negative emotions in a job interview in turn made them more likely to come across as more promising job candidates during the interview process (Pennebaker, 1997). Thus, the process of expressive writing showed promise not only in the fields of improving participants' physical and mental health, but also in the potential of improving one's work life.

Since these initial expressive writing studies, it is estimated at least three hundred studies focused on the benefits of expressive writing have been conducted and published (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). These studies have expanded far beyond college-aged students and engineers, and have branched out to include populations such as grade-school children, nursing home residents, arthritis sufferers, medical school students, maximum security prisoners, new mothers, and rape victims, all of whom have demonstrated improved physical and mental health following their participation in expressive writing studies (Pennebaker, 1997). In fact, additional studies have also shown that taking part in expressive writing activities may help reduce anxiety and depression, improve the grades of college students, and help people secure new employment (Pennebaker, 1997). The variety of studies over a variety of populations indicates there are many people who may benefit from expressive writing, and many potential benefits of expressive writing.

Chapter II: Effects and Benefits of Expressive Writing

As mentioned in the first chapter, there are a vast array of benefits associated with engaging in expressive writing, including helping people improve their grades or gain employment. There are also many physical and emotional benefits to expressive writing. Traumatic, difficult, or emotional experiences take a toll on individuals. In fact, in the aftermath of an emotional upheaval, people are more likely to experience depression, become sick, experience dramatic weight fluctuation, and die from heart disease or cancer at higher rates (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Supporting this phenomenon is the Adverse Childhood Experiences Study. The landmark study of over 12,000 people established childhood trauma was a strong predictor of serious illness in adulthood (Stockdale, 2011; Brown et al., 2010; Dube et al., 2009; Fellitti, 2009; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). In other words, experiencing a traumatic event can potentially lead to both physical and emotional problems, including the development of serious illnesses.

Expressive writing studies have further discovered that while undergoing a traumatic experience is indeed detrimental to the health-- both physical and emotional-- of individuals, those who kept a traumatic experience to themselves created even more potential problems. Not talking about trauma places people at an even higher risk for illnesses compared to those who do talk about a traumatic experience (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Following the initial expressive writing studies conducted by Pennebaker, follow up studies have further supported the notion that expressive writing has both physical and emotional benefits.

Biological and Physiological Effects of Expressive Writing

Those dealing with both chronic illnesses and those in relative health may experience improved immune function and positive medical markers of health following engagement in expressive writing activities. Stress levels can impact immune function positively or negatively because the body's immune system can function more or less effectively depending on an individual's stress levels. Labs at various universities including Ohio State, University of Miami, and Auckland Medical School in New Zealand have found that emotional or expressive writing is associated with a general enhancement in immune function as it helps people regulate their emotions, and, therefore, their stress levels (Koschwanez et al., 2013 Pennebaker, Kiecolt-Glasser, & Glasser, 1998; Petrie et al., 2004; Lumley et. al., 2011, Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). While it is important to note studies have not yet determined the impact such effects might have on the long-term health of people who take part in expressive writing exercises, it is understood that because expressive writing enhances emotion regulation and can reduce stress levels, it therefore can play a key role in brain and immune physiology as well (Petrie et al., 2004, Pennebaker & Evans, 2014).

Expressive writing may be beneficial in assisting the management of chronic illnesses, as well. Those with chronic illnesses or health problems often have certain medical markers of health or other indicators monitored by physicians in order to determine the status of their illness and whether or not their condition is improving or deteriorating (Pennebaker, 1997). When patients dealing with chronic health problems took part in expressive writing studies, a multitude of benefits and improvements were shown to take place. For example, those with both asthma and rheumatoid arthritis showed improvement in lung function and joint mobility (Smyth &

Arigo, 2010; Smyth, Stone & Hurewitz et al., 1999; Pennebaker & Evans 2014). Patients with AIDS demonstrated increased white blood cell counts (Petrie et al., 2004; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Furthermore, multiple studies with cancer patients demonstrated reduction of physical symptoms and overall pain, improved sleep, and higher functioning during the daytime (Henry et. al., 2010; Low et. al., 2010; De Moor et. al, 2002; Rosenberg et. al. 2002; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014).

Likewise, expressive writing has also shown to be beneficial in regards to physiological indicators of stress. When writing or speaking about trauma, people often show immediate, visible signs of stress reduction, including lower muscle tension in their faces (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). In addition to showing signs of reduced stress while in the process of writing about trauma, people who took part in expressive writing have also displayed lower blood pressure and lower heart rates immediately after writing about emotional topics (Pennebaker, Hughes, & O'Heeron, 1987).

In general, becoming aware of psychological causes of recurring health problems can help those health problems subside to some degree (Pennebaker, 1997). When people become aware of a connection between certain physical symptoms, such as increased heart rate for instance, and the underlying emotional cause for those symptoms, such as anxiety, the physical symptoms and corresponding health problems become more predictable and, therefore, more controllable (Pennebaker, 1997). If one is able to make a connection between the physical symptoms of anxiety-- including increased heart rate, hyperventilation, feelings of weakness or tiredness, sweating, trembling, or difficulty concentrating-- and a root cause for the anxiety-- an upcoming exam, for example-- that person would then be able to address the cause of their anxiety in order to ease the anxiety symptoms, as well.

Expressive writing is not only beneficial to those suffering from chronic pain or illness. Studies have shown benefits for adults in relative health, as well, including modest reduction in resting blood pressure levels (McGuire, 2005; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). In other words, expressive writing is not only physically beneficial to those suffering from chronic pain or illness, but can have physical benefits for anyone, even those in relatively good health.

Psychological Effects of Expressive Writing

Just as expressive writing has been shown to provide physical and biological benefits, so too has the practice of writing honestly about trauma been shown to have psychological benefits. While participants in expressive writing activities often report feeling worse immediately after writing about trauma-- with some exceptions-- feelings of sadness following expressive writing are typically relatively short term, lasting about one to two hours (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Indeed, across multiple studies, people who engage in expressive writing activities have reported feeling happier and less negative after writing; furthermore, participants have reported a decrease in depressive symptoms, ruminations, and general anxiety in the weeks and months following writing about trauma (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Lepore, 1997). While expressive writing is by no means a cure for mental illness or a replacement for treatment for mental illness, it has nevertheless shown to have positive psychological effects for those who engage in the activity. Expressive writing has also demonstrated success in helping participants process and heal from trauma. The guiding assumption of present work and research into the benefits of expressive writing is that constructing stories-- whether in the form of writing or through verbal communication-- is a natural human process which allows people to better understand both their experiences as well as themselves as human beings (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Creating stories is constructive to the process of healing as it allows individuals to organize the events

associated with a trauma, as well as their emotional response to these events, in a coherent fashion, thus lending to a sense of both predictability and control, elements which are often lost in the aftermath of a traumatic event (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

Furthermore, the construction of a meaningful narrative facilitates a sense of resolution following a trauma (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). Without a sense of resolution, people often find themselves ruminating on a traumatic event, as well as the associated emotions; furthermore, such ruminations are also frequently associated with post-traumatic stress disorder (Caruth, 1995). PTSD often takes the form of repetitious thoughts, behaviors, and even hallucinations or dreams regarding a trauma (Caruth, 1995). Regardless of whether or not an individual develops PTSD following a traumatic experience, the act of organizing one's memories of a trauma and interweaving the emotions felt during the trauma into a coherent narrative can be beneficial in processing the traumatic event, as giving an experience structure and meaning through the construction of a story leads to the emotional effects of that experience becoming more manageable (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999). In facilitating a sense of resolution through the construction of stories, disturbing or upsetting experiences gradually subside from conscious thought (Pennebaker & Seagal, 1999).

Another way in which expressive writing may help people process trauma is through habituation. Some researchers believe the benefits of expressive writing may be the result of an increased exposure to their trauma (Baddeley & Pennebaker, 2011; De Giacomo et al., 2010; Sloan & Marx, 2009 qtd. in Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Through writing about a traumatic experience and the emotions associated with the trauma, people are exposed to both memories of the trauma and their feelings about it with each writing session. When considered through this lens, expressive writing functions as a form of exposure therapy, allowing people to revisit their

memories of an upsetting experience time after time, leading to their reactions to the experience becoming smaller and smaller with each writing session (Baddeley & Pennebaker, 2011; De Giacomo et al., 2010; Sloan & Marx, 2009 qtd. in Pennebaker & Evans, 2014.). Because writing repeatedly about the same topic can lead to a decreased reaction to the experience upon each writing session, the method of writing for several consecutive days is additionally successful. The four consecutive days of writing about the same topic allow for those engaging in the expressive writing activity to experience this decrease in emotional reaction with each consecutive writing session.

Behavioral Effects of Expressive Writing

In addition to the physical and emotional benefits of expressive writing, those who engage in expressive writing activities may also experience positive behavioral changes. Chief among these behavior effects is improved performance at work or school. At least three studies have shown that students achieve higher grades in the semester after participating in an expressive writing study (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Cameron & Nicholls, 1998; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990). A possible reason for these improved grades is that emotional writing boosts people's working memory. Working memory refers to people's ability to think about complex tasks (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Thus, if someone's mind is focused on worrying about something-- such as a past or recent trauma-- that person has less working memory allowing them to focus on complex tasks, such as classwork or assignments (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). However, expressive writing can free up working memory, allowing people to deal with complicated issues in their lives (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Klein & Boals, 2001). Through freeing working memory, students are able to focus on the complex tasks of college coursework.

How and Why Does It Work?

There are many reasons expressive writing may be beneficial. One such reason lies in the fact that writing allows us to remove ourselves from situations and observe both ourselves and our trauma from a distance. Writing allows people to become observers, which is an important component in the development of resilience (DeSalvo, 2000). People regard their own lives and experiences with a certain degree of detachment when viewing those experiences as subject matter to describe and interpret in writing (DeSalvo, 2000). In other words, writing allows people to step outside of themselves, in a sense, and describe and view both themselves as well as trauma they have experienced in a new, more detached manner. Doing so may be helpful in reframing struggles and trauma because the process of writing about trauma involves asking themselves how to articulate their experiences and emotions in a way that will make sense (DeSalvo, 2000). That is to say, a large part of the reframing process revolves around finding a way to describe both a traumatic experience as well as a response to said experience in a coherent manner. When people transform their feelings and thoughts about upsetting or traumatic experiences into language, their physical and mental health often improve as a result (Pennebaker & Chung, 2008).

Who Benefits?

Most people benefit from expressive writing. However, a contributing factor to how beneficial expressive writing may be is how in touch an individual is with their own emotions when beginning to write. Interestingly, people who are more hostile or out-of-touch with their emotions tend to show greater health improvements after engaging in expressive writing than those who are more easygoing, self-reflective, and open (Smyth, 1998; Christensen, Edwards, Weibe, et al., 1996). It may come as a surprise to learn that those who are less in-touch with their

emotions may benefit more, but there is in fact a reasonable correlation between a tendency towards hostility, emotional avoidance, overall health, and the benefits of expressive writing.

Chronic health conditions are often linked to people who cope with trauma by repressing memories of and emotions surrounding a traumatic event, as well as those who struggle to find language or expression for emotion (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Studies have also shown maladaptive responses to stress can cause an individual's risk of stress-related disorders and disease to rise (Cusianto & L'Abate, 2012; Stockdale, 2011, Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). In other words, just as being open about emotional and traumatic experiences may help increase immune function and improve symptoms of chronic illnesses, so too can being closed-off and refusal or inability to acknowledge traumatic experiences and their subsequent effects on one's overall wellbeing negatively impact immune function and contribute to stress-related disease.

While those who are less in touch with their emotions and more likely to display hostility may be particularly good candidates for expressive writing, it is important to note that anyone can experience trauma and find themselves struggling to open up about the experience for any number of reasons (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Indeed, when it comes to the trauma of the COVID-19 pandemic, anyone, regardless of temperament, may have experienced or currently be experiencing both emotional turmoil and a sense of inability to discuss their emotions. As such, expressive writing may be beneficial for anyone, regardless of their typical temperament.

While expressive writing may be helpful to anyone regardless of health status or temperament, as stated throughout this chapter, it is particularly effective when it comes to emotional upheaval. With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, people worldwide experienced an emotional upheaval. In chapter three, I discuss the connection between the COVID-19 pandemic and trauma, explain how expressive writing can help specifically with processing

trauma, and examine the current research into the benefits of writing expressively about COVID-19.

Chapter III: Trauma and COVID-19

In the winter of late 2019 and early 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic began to spread rapidly across the world. The first case of COVID-19 in the United States was reported on January 16, 2020, making it the fifth country to report instances of COVID-19 infection (Roberts, Rossman, & Jaric, 2021). As the virus spread, so too did fears and uncertainty surrounding the illness. Although origins of the virus were speculated about, they remained widely unknown, as did methods of transmission, incubation period, and mortality rate for those who contracted COVID-19.

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization officially declared COVID-19 a pandemic, and by March 19, California became the first state to issue stay-at-home orders (Keaten, Cheng, & Leicester, 2020; AJMC Staff, 2021). Days later, the first stay-at-home order was issued by Governor Pritzker in Illinois, which took effect on Saturday, March 21 (Petrella, St. Clair, Johnson, & Pratt, 2020). As stay-at-home orders began to take effect across the country and the globe, fears surrounding the dangers of the COVID-19 virus became compounded with fears of job loss as well as increasing loneliness as people found themselves isolated from friends and loved ones. The uncertainty surrounding both COVID-19 as well as the length of time in which people would be required to stay at home and isolate themselves from others further added to anxieties as time wore on, taking a toll on the mental health and well-being of people worldwide.

The impact of COVID-19 on the mental health of people across the globe was noted early on, and by August 2020, six months after the first stay-at-home orders had been issued, *Psychological Trauma: Theory, Research, Practice and Policy* published a special edition focused on exploring the effects of COVID-19 on a variety of populations. The publication notes

that while large-scale disasters exist throughout human history, the COVID-19 pandemic is a unique disaster in important ways (Kendall-Tackett, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to psychological trauma on a global scale (Goldman & Galea, 2014; Yang, Tu, & Dai, 2020). Not only is the virus spread across the globe, leading to fears of infection anywhere in the world, but the combination of media coverage and global lockdowns further contributed to the trauma. Even those who have not been diagnosed with COVID-19 have experienced fear and uncertainty regarding the virus, especially in the early days of the pandemic (Kendall-Tackett, 2020).

Watching and reading media coverage of this pandemic and the traumatic scenarios being faced worldwide was particularly distressing for many, especially in the cases of early, devastating outbreaks such as those in Italy and Spain (Kendall-Tackett, 2020). In the earliest months of the pandemic, healthcare workers in these countries were forced to make decisions regarding which of their patients would receive potentially life-saving medical intervention and treatment and which patients would not (Kendall-Tackett, 2020). With most of the global population confined to their homes, people were not only able to watch stories such as these unfold in real time, but were left with additional time in isolation to ruminate over these and other terrifying scenarios (Kendall-Tackett, 2020). The ability to both consume information regarding the devastation of the pandemic rapidly and in real time only further contributed to the fears and trauma stemming from the existence of COVID-19.

Access to news coverage and information is also one of the aspects of the COVID-19 pandemic that makes it a unique trauma. As previously mentioned, large-scale disasters have taken place throughout human history; indeed, even large-scale outbreaks of deadly diseases have occurred throughout history. However, at no other time in human history have people had

the ability to bear witness to the impact of a deadly disease in real time and across the world. While the initial intent of many may have been to stay up-to-date and well-informed on the disease in hopes of learning more about how to keep themselves and others safe, the constant cycle of news and frightening information devolved into doom-scrolling for many, further contributing to fear and trauma.

The focus of this thesis is specifically on college and university students, but it is noteworthy that almost everyone has experienced some form of trauma due to the COVID-19 pandemic. In fact, existing studies into the impact of disaster experiences on adults have shown that following a disaster, adults may develop sleep disorders, depression, emotional distress, and worsening psychological symptoms (Becker-Blease, Turner, & Finkelhor, 2010; Bonanno et al., 2008; Steel, Silove, Phan, & Bauman, 2002, Yang, Tu, and Dai 2020). Those who are already less resilient are at an even greater risk of mental health problems in the aftermath of a traumatic event or disaster (Hildebrand, Celeri, Morcillo, & Zanolli, 2019). Evidence has shown individuals who are already struggling with mental illness or existing trauma may be at an even higher risk for worsening symptoms, or developing new symptoms in the aftermath of a traumatic experience.

Even those who are highly resilient in other scenarios may be at a high risk for developing the aforementioned or other struggles in the aftermath of a trauma (Artime, Buchholz, & Jakupcak, 2019; Arnason, 2009). This is because resilience is not sufficient for coping with disaster and the victimization caused by it (Arnason, 2009). Furthermore, resiliency may in fact be impaired if disasters carry high risks, as the COVID-19 pandemic does (Arnason, 2009). In other words, even those who are typically resilient may find themselves struggling more during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Everyone, regardless of existing mental health status, is at risk of struggling with their mental health and well-being following a trauma. Thus, anyone, regardless of their mental health prior to a trauma, may therefore benefit from taking part in activities that may help them process the traumatic event and their emotions. Expressive writing offers great potential to helping people begin to heal.

When to Write

While expressive writing can be extremely beneficial in helping people process and heal from trauma, it is also important to consider how recently a trauma took place in order to keep writers from retraumatizing themselves. In particular, writing about a traumatic experience within the first few days after the trauma will likely not be beneficial (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). The reason it will not necessarily be helpful to someone to write about trauma immediately after it occurs stems from the fact that people are often disoriented within the first one to three weeks following a traumatic event, particularly a severe trauma (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). If an individual is still in a state of reeling following a trauma, research suggests it is likely too soon for that person to begin seriously writing expressively about the event (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Although expressive writing can indeed help people process a trauma by assisting in the organization and integration of thoughts and feelings, when those thoughts and feelings are still too disorienting for an individual to articulate, it can make expressive writing more difficult than beneficial.

It is important to consider how recently a trauma took place before determining whether or not expressive writing may be beneficial to the traumatized person; however, an ongoing trauma such as the COVID-19 pandemic differs due to its duration. At the onset and through the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, it may not have been helpful for students to engage in

expressive writing activities, as the initial upheaval may have left many feeling far too disoriented for expressive writing to be particularly helpful. However, at the time of this writing, many college campuses, including GSU, are reopening to students and holding in-person classes once more. While these in-person classes are different in several ways as universities take care to meet COVID-19 safety guidelines, they do offer a return to some semblance of normalcy.

That is not to say, of course, that this return to some semblance of normalcy means the COVID-19 pandemic, or the trauma it has wrought, is by any means at an endpoint. Certainly, COVID-19 continues to impact many. However, with the amount of time that has passed since the first confirmed cases and the ensuing initial shock, we are entering a period of time in which it would be beneficial to students to engage in expressive writing activities about their feelings surrounding the COVID-19 pandemic.

An important caveat to this assertion is, of course, that any new traumatic event connected to the COVID-19 pandemic would mean it may be necessary to halt any expressive writing about the topic, as it would once again be too recently traumatic. For example, in the instance of a new variant that is resistant to the vaccines, or another wave of infections leading to further stay-at-home orders or shutdowns, it would likely no longer be beneficial to engage in expressive writing about the pandemic. Additionally, for people currently suffering the recent loss of a loved one to COVID-19, it may be far too early to write expressively on the matter. However, barring these or other similar circumstances, evidence suggests it may be helpful to many to write about COVID-19 and its emotional toll in order to process the associated emotions.

Expressive Writing and COVID-19

There is not yet much information regarding the benefits of expressive writing when it comes to COVID-19 specifically. However, research into how language use connects to COVID-19, and how expressive writing might be beneficial during and after the pandemic, are already underway. Among these studies is a project centered around analyzing Reddit posts in several major cities being conducted by Pennebaker (Pennebaker, 2020; Wallis, 2020).

The study analyzing Reddit posts involves tracking the ways in which people have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic by studying both their reactions as well as the language that has been used since the beginning of the pandemic (Pennebaker, 2020). In each Reddit group currently being studied by Pennebaker, approximately 10% of posts refer to either COVID, COVID-19, or the coronavirus (Pennebaker, 2020). Additionally, certain words, including “anxiety,” “sadness,” and “anger” have been used frequently (Pennebaker, 2020). The word “anxiety” in particular has risen significantly in use when referring to the COVID-19 pandemic, and has remained fixed at a higher usage than in previous years (Pennebaker, 2020). Furthermore, there has been a significant drop in positive-emotion words over the course of the pandemic, and particularly during times of isolation during stay-at-home orders (Pennebaker, 2020).

Considering the degree to which COVID-19 disrupted the world as well as the previous success of expressive writing when it came to processing trauma, Pennebaker chose to begin research into how expressive writing might benefit those struggling during the COVID-19 pandemic. This research is ongoing at the time of this writing, however, it also aligns with the goals of this thesis to a far larger degree. An expressive writing intervention website called the

Pandemic Project was created with the goal of studying the ways our lives are impacted by COVID-19, gathering data regarding the benefits of expressive writing for those traumatized by COVID-19, and providing assistance to those who are struggling (Pennebaker, 2020; Bills, 2021). While a paper is currently being written by Pennebaker and graduate student Ashwini Ashokkuma regarding the months of March through May 2020 based on the data collected, the website is still open to those who wish to engage in expressive writing activities geared specifically towards writing about COVID-19. The expressive writing activities on this website are among those that might be drawn upon when crafting expressive writing exercises for use in the first-year writing classroom.

CHAPTER IV: Expressive Writing in the First-year Writing Classroom During and After COVID-19

Expressivist pedagogy is concerned with the development of the whole person (Burnham & Powell, 2014). In other words, expressivist pedagogy is focused on improving writers themselves as people by allowing them to express, and therefore, connect with, themselves and the world around them, rather that only on improving a piece of writing. As mentioned in previous chapters, studies have shown that expressive writing can lead to positive results, including positively impacting mental and physical health, improving sleep habits, improving work efficiency, and bettering connections to others (Pennebaker & Chung, 2008; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). In other words, expressive writing has the potential not only to benefit students' mental and physical health, but to improve classroom performance, as well.

The notion that expressive writing might help college students succeed in the classroom is not new. In fact, expressive writing studies among college students have shown that expressive writing helps new college students adjust to their new environment; further, studies have also found that students tend to achieve higher grades in the semester after taking part in a writing study (Lumley & Provenzano, 2003; Cameron & Nichols, 1998; Pennebaker, Colder, & Sharp, 1990; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). The academic improvements of students following a writing study may be credited to the improved psychological state many who partake in expressive writing have reported. Students who engaged in expressive writing about upcoming exams reported improved mood prior to their exams, and improved performance on the exams themselves (Dalton & Glenwick, 2009; Frattaroli, Thomas, & Lyubomirsky, 2011; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). It is likely the same would hold true for students who engaged in expressive writing prior to an essay or class project: their improved outlook on the assignment could potentially cause improved performance on the assignment, as well. With such benefits in mind,

it is highly likely that expressive writing exercises implemented into first-year writing classrooms at the university level would indeed be helpful to students.

Preparing for Expressive Writing Exercises

When considering methods of integrating expressive writing exercises into the first-year writing classroom, it is helpful to consider successful methodologies as starting points and guidelines. For instance, it is important that expressive writing activities be optional to students, in case anyone feels uncomfortable with writing about a certain topic. Students should be made aware that they are free to stop writing at any time if they do feel they are becoming too upset when thinking and writing about a particular topic. Additionally, when constructing prompts and preparing students to write, it would be helpful to follow Pennebaker's approach and remind students that their expressive writing will not be graded or judged in any way, nor will their writing be read by anyone else; thus, there is no need to worry about spelling, grammar, or sentence structure when writing expressively (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Pennebaker, 1990).

In my time as both a university student and as a Supplemental Instructor, Writing Fellow, Teaching Assistant, and Graduate Assistant, I have often noted how frequently students-- and, in particular, first-year university students-- wonder how many points are assigned to everything they do in a particular class. Students who are concerned about losing points due to grammatical or spelling errors may find themselves not only more focused on mechanics, but may also become distressed about the writing, and will therefore be less likely to benefit from expressive writing. For these reasons, it is important to assure students before the writing process begins that they do not need to focus on crafting an essay with the goal of achieving a certain score.

Of course, expressive writing essays will not be scored at all, a point that is perhaps even more important to impress upon students prior to writing. While many expressive writing studies

have afforded anonymity to participants to some degree, in some cases, writing was still collected in order to analyze content and word usage. However, students engaging in expressive writing activities in a first-year writing classroom are not taking part in a study of any sort; rather, they are writing for themselves, and for their own benefit. As such, writing should not be collected by professors at all, and should be left with students to keep-- or discard-- as they see fit.

Affording this complete privacy to students is perhaps the best way to encourage students to be more honest in their writing, as there will be no risk of anyone else reading what they have written, connecting their feelings to them, or passing judgement on their thoughts or emotions. Many people do not disclose their trauma for fear of how others will react (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Furthermore, when people do disclose trauma to someone they do not know or trust, they tend to hold back, and, because they are holding back, they tend to not reap the same benefits as those who really let go in their writing (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). First-year students will likely not know their professor, or indeed, most of their peers; as such, it is imperative that they know that their writing is for them, and them alone. Additionally, even if students do know their professor, the knowledge that someone will be reading about their trauma and their emotions surrounding trauma may cause them to hold back, and therefore keep them from experiencing the benefits of expressive writing. Finally, the assurance of anonymity will also serve to eliminate any lingering fears about use of proper spelling and grammar, as students will be able to be certain that no one will see their writing.

Several steps might be taken in order to ensure student anonymity. In particular, allowing students to write in any way they are comfortable, including by hand in a notebook especially for such activities, on their laptops in a file they will later delete, or even in a notes app on their

phones are all ways to make certain student writing remains with the writer alone. While writing by hand certainly has benefits-- for example, allowing writers more time to think about what they are writing-- there are no significant differences when it comes to the success of expressive writing exercises and modes of writing (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). As such, allowing students to write in the manner they feel most comfortable will not only likely produce the best results, but also help students feel more secure.

While it is important to allow students to maintain privacy and to keep their expressive writing to themselves, it is also important for professors to regularly remind students of the mental health resources available to them on campus throughout the semester, and especially throughout the expressive writing process. Because expressive writing may help students process their emotions, the practice may also help them better understand what help they may need moving forward. Therefore, students should be encouraged to bring up any questions or concerns that may come up in the course of their writing to their professor so they might be connected to the proper services. For example, students who find themselves writing about mental health struggles might benefit from being connected to their campus counseling services. Indeed, it may be further helpful to arrange for a visit to the class from a member of the counseling staff at the beginning of the semester and prior to expressive writing activities in order to make students aware of the mental health resources available on campus.

Of course, it is important for both students and professors alike to keep in mind that professors of English are not mental health counselors and are therefore neither qualified nor able to provide counseling services to students themselves. Therefore, it may be further beneficial to professors who choose to employ expressive writing exercises in their classroom to keep contact information for various resources available to students on hand.

In fact, these resources may be helpful throughout a given semester, and not only prior to or immediately following an expressive writing exercise. In my time working as a Writing Fellow, Supplemental Instructor, and Teaching Assistant, I have often found that writing of all kinds, not only expressive writing, can bring about strong emotions for writers. One assignment in particular, a literacy narrative assigned to first-year writing students at GSU, frequently led to students thinking about, and sharing, various difficulties they have faced, or struggles they currently found themselves facing. As a student worker, I was also not in any position to provide mental health services myself, and so I made it a habit to keep information on hand about the various services provided to students at GSU. Additionally, I familiarized myself with important locations on campus such as the counseling center, disability services, and the food pantry, which enabled me to help students physical find services they may need, as well. Actions such as these may be utilized by professors who hold expressive writing exercises in their classrooms, in order to connect students with the help they may need.

"The Flip Out Rule"

Of course, writing about trauma-- whether trauma specifically related to the COVID-19 pandemic, or another trauma in one's life-- has the potential to be upsetting to the writer. In addition to professors reminding students of resources available to them on campus, it is also important for professors integrating expressive writing exercises into their classrooms to remind students regularly of "The Flip Out Rule," initially coined by Pennebaker. Simply put, if a writer feels a topic will be too distressing for them to write about-- or that writing about a certain topic will cause them to "flip out"-- they should not write about that topic (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). The goal of writing expressively about trauma is to help an individual process and heal, not to cause them any further distress. Thus, if writing about a specific trauma will be too

overwhelming to someone, they should not write about that trauma. It is also important to keep in mind that just because a trauma feels too difficult or upsetting to write about on one occasion does not mean that trauma will never be something that a person can explore through expressive writing. Rather, this simply means they are not able to write about that topic at the current time. In this case, writers are encouraged to select another, less distressing topic to focus on for the time being.

In a classroom setting, students should regularly be reminded of "The Flip Out Rule." If at any time students feel uncomfortable with writing, or continuing to write, about a particular topic, they should be reminded they are free to stop writing for the day, or to change topics.

CHAPTER V: Suggested Exercises and Assignments

When constructing prompts for expressive writing classroom activities, there are several things to bear in mind. Several guidelines have tended to lead to the most beneficial expressive writing experiences for individuals partaking in various studies. (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). These guidelines can be modified for both personal writing at home, as well as to fit into a classroom setting. It is helpful for those writing expressively to openly acknowledge their emotions in their writing (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Because of this, it would be beneficial to integrate instructions about writing sincerely about emotions into any expressive writing prompts.

Additionally, as previously stated, it is helpful for writers to work towards constructing a coherent story, as making a meaningful story of what happened and how it is affecting an individual helps organize the memory of trauma (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). It is not necessary to explain the entire history of expressive writing to students-- though, of course, a detailed explanation can certainly be provided to those who are interested in learning more about the topic. However, it is helpful to explain to students why an activity is taking place. Therefore, it may be helpful to incorporate a brief explanation as to the benefits of organizing thoughts into a coherent, written narrative into prompts or instructions prior to an expressive writing activity.

It is also, of course, important to give students specific prompts for each expressive writing activity. While the COVID-19 Pandemic is a broad topic that may generate plenty of thoughts, it is possible students may also struggle with narrowing their focus down enough to write. It is also important to afford students the option to choose to write about something unrelated to COVID-19. Thus, it is necessary to create instructions and prompts that may encompass a wide variety of things students want to write about. When considering where to

start when crafting prompts, previously utilized examples may be helpful starting points, such as those listed below:

- Write about what keeps you awake at night (Pennebaker & Evans 2014).
- Write only about traumas that are present in your mind (Pennebaker & Evans 2014).
- Write to learn where you need to go (Pennebaker & Evans 2014).

  When it comes to expressive writing, it can be helpful to follow where emotion leads. While writers may start with a trauma, they may also soon begin writing about other topics (Pennebaker & Evans 2014). If the topics writers find themselves drawn to describing and discussing feel emotionally relevant, it is encouraged that they allow themselves to follow those topics, even if they differ from the original goal of the writing assignment or prompt; however, if writers find themselves describing mundane things or a distracting topic, students should return to the original prompt (Pennebaker & Evans 2014). With that in mind, however, it is also helpful to note that topic-switching is acceptable, and often helpful; if writers find themselves getting bored with the topic they are writing about, they are encouraged to switch to a new topic, including one they may have been actively avoiding (Pennebaker & Evans 2014).

Additionally, when constructing prompts for classroom expressive writing activities, it may also be helpful to consider exercises that reinterpret a problem through writing about it, or directing people down a path that will urge them to change their current thought process (Wilson, 2011). In addition, professors and those constructing prompts or conducting expressive writing activities might bear in mind that the behavior people exhibit will shape the personal narratives they craft for themselves; as such encouraging students to treat themselves and others kindly in

the first-year writing classroom may help students view themselves in a more positive light, and therefore write a more positive personal narrative (Wilson, 2011). In other words, including urges towards kindness, or even similar positive words, within prompts may help students both write about and view themselves in a more positive light.

Furthermore, it may also be helpful to consider a variation on some of the initial prompts and instructions given in early expressive writing assignments, which were as follows:

> You have signed up for an experiment where you will be writing for four days, fifteen minutes per day in a solitary room down the hall. Everything you write will be completely anonymous and confidential. You will never receive any feedback about your writing. At the conclusion of each day's writing, we ask that you put your writing in a large box so that we can analyze it. However, your giving it to us is completely up to you.
>
> In your writing, I want you to really let go and explore your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your life. In your writing, try to tie this traumatic experience to other parts of your life-- your childhood, your relationship to your parents, close friends, lovers, or others important to you. You might link your writing to your future and who you would like to become, to who you have been in the past, or to who you are now. The important thing is that you really let go and write about your deepest emotions and thoughts. You can write about the same thing for all four days or about different things each day-- that is entirely up to you. Many people have not had traumatic experiences, but all of us have faced major conflicts or stressors-- and you can write about those as well. (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014).

While these instructions worked well for early expressive writing experiments, it is necessary to make changes in order to fit the needs of the first-year writing classroom. As such, recommended writing instructions will be included in the next subchapter.

Suggested Writing Instructions

With all of this in mind, I suggest including a specific set of the same instructions at the beginning of each expressive writing session, followed by a specific prompt for each session. Below is a suggested prompt for expressive writing sessions in a first-year writing classroom.

> Our class will be doing an expressive writing activity. Expressive writing is a type of writing that allows you to write freely about your feelings about a specific topic. Writing about an experience, and how that experience made you feel, is helpful because it allows you to organize your thoughts and feelings into a coherent narrative. When your thoughts and feelings are organized in this way, it helps you process things.
>
> For the next five days, we will be writing for fifteen minutes per day at the beginning of each class. Everything you write will be completely anonymous and confidential. You will not be graded on any of this writing, and you will not be asked to share this writing with anyone. Do not worry about spelling, grammar, punctuation, sentence structure, or word use; this writing is for you and you alone.
>
> You can also write in any manner that you like: you can type on your laptop, whether in Word or in a Google doc, hand write in a notebook or on a piece of paper, or even use the notes app on your phone. Write in whatever way you are most comfortable. If you would like to write by hand and need a piece of paper or a pen, please come to the front of the room after these instructions, and these materials will be provided for you.

Your writing is just for you, however, if any questions or concerns come up during the course of your writing, please reach out to me, and I will help connect you to services here at the university that may help you.

While a topic will be given for this writing exercise each day, you are not required to write about the topic, or to write at all. If you feel as though writing about the topic will be too difficult or upsetting for you, please do not write about this topic. No matter what you choose to do, your grades will not be impacted, and you will not be penalized in any way. The goal of this activity is to help each of you, not to grade or pass judgement

Following the construction of writing instructions that will fit and benefit individual classrooms, the next step is creating prompts. In the following section, I put forth suggested prompts for expressive writing exercises in the first-year writing classroom.

Suggested Prompts

After giving these instructions to students, and after ensuring students are prepared to write, the prompt may be given. While these prompts may be adjusted to fit a specific class or instance, several prompts may be considered in helping first-year writing students during and after the COVID-19 pandemic pertaining directly to the impact of the virus on students' lives and mental health. Below are several suggested prompts:

- Write about how the pandemic has impacted you, your family, and those closest to you.
- Write about how COVID-19 has impacted either your physical or mental health, or both.
- Write about how the pandemic has impacted your academic plans or goals. Think about how the pandemic has impacted school-related activities, like sports, clubs, and organizations, as well as classes. Address how these changes have made you feel.

- Write about how remote learning has affected you. Think about what it was like to transition to remote learning, as well as to transition back to in-person learning. Consider how these concerns are similar to or different than your feelings about starting college.
- Write about how COVID-19 has impacted your job. Think about whether you were an essential worker, if you worked from home, or if you were unable to work due to COVID-19. Consider anyone you know who also experienced a change in their employment due to the pandemic. Write about how you feel about returning to work or joining the workforce post-COVID-19.
- Think about how you have changed since the beginning of 2020. Consider whether your experiences during COVID-19, stay-at-home orders, or remote learning, contributed to those changes. Write about how you feel you have changed as a person over the course of the pandemic.
- Think about how you felt during stay-at-home orders, and how your feelings changed or altered over the course of the pandemic. Write about what it was like to be in lockdown, and how the situation made you feel.
- Consider how COVID-19 impacted your social life. For example, think about how you engaged with friends during lockdown, or the ways the pandemic changed the way you spent time with people. Write about how you spent time with friends during lockdown, and how this made you feel.
- Think about how you feel about spending time with people socially once more, and how you feel about meeting new people and making new friends in college. Write about these feelings. Consider how the pandemic may have impacted your feelings about spending time with people in-person, or making new friends. Think about whether or not COVID-

19 still impacts the way you socialize, or how you would be comfortable engaging with new friends at college.

Writing Time

As previously noted, improvements have been shown for those who write for twenty minutes a day for three to four consecutive days; however, if students feel they would like to write more about a particular topic, they should be allowed and encouraged to do so, in order to explore their thoughts fully (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). Conversely, if students feel they would like to stop writing after a certain period of time, or if time constraints do not allow for twenty minutes of writing as a continual activity recent research suggests that people can benefit even if they write for briefer amounts of time-- as few as five minutes on each occasion (Pennebaker & Evans, 2014). With this in mind, I suggest the first three to four class exercises involve writing continually for twenty minutes; moving forward, it may be both beneficial and more reasonable in keeping with a class schedule to allow for writing time at the beginning or end of class sessions for shorter amounts of time, or giving students the tools necessary to do this kind of work at home or on their own.

Resources for Expressive Writing at Home

There are several ways in which students might be equipped with the tools to engage in expressive writing activities in their own time. First, in addition to verbally instructing students as to how to engage in an expressive writing activity and stating prompts aloud, it may be beneficial to share a handout with instructions and daily prompts, or to post this information on Blackboard. Doing so enables students to return to this information at a later date if they are so inclined.

Additionally, there are several online resources that have been created specifically to assist people in expressive writing, and writing specifically about COVID-19. However, students should be informed that if they choose to enter their writing directly into these websites, the data will be collected for research purposes. Although they will remain anonymous, their writing will be analyzed if entered into these websites. If students are comfortable with this, or indeed, if they would like to assist in contributing to research about expressive writing and COVID-19, they can certainly write directly on these websites. However, if students would prefer to keep their writing completely to themselves, they might simply use these websites for prompts or ideas to begin their own expressive writing, but continue to write by hand, in a file on their computer, or on their phones.

Two such websites are:

- The Pandemic Project. The Pandemic Project is a social psychology initiative that was started by Pennebaker and graduate student Ashwini Ashokkumar, along with Ph.D. candidate Laura Vergani. The social psychology initiative was created with the goal of studying the ways in which people's everyday lives have been, and continue to be, impacted by COVID-19. People accessing this website are able to take a COVID survey and receive personal feedback about both their coping methods as well as information regarding methods that may be helpful ("The Pandemic Project," 2020). The website features a variety of expressive writing prompts and activities, as well as other tests and surveys. These can be done directly on the website for those who would like to contribute to the research, but the prompts can also simply be used as a starting point for those who would like to write expressively at home.

  The Pandemic Project can be accessed at https://utpsyc.org/covid19/index.html.

- Expressive Interviewing. Expressive Interviewing is a collaborative project between Pennebaker and Professor Rada Mihalcea and offers prompts regarding both COVID-19 and Black Lives Matter. As with the previous website, students may enter their writing directly into Expressive Interviewing if they wish to contribute to the research, or may simply use the website for inspiration for their own expressive writing endeavors. Expressive Interviewing can be accessed at https://expressiveinterviewing.org/.

Implementing Expressive Writing into the First-year Writing Classroom

There are myriad benefits for students if professors choose to utilize expressive writing activities in the first-year writing classroom, including the previously mentioned potential for improving student work efficiency, helping students better connect to others, and helping students improve in both mental and physical health, as well as helping students process their emotions (Pennebaker & Chung, 2008; Pennebaker & Evans, 2014; Dalton & Glenwick, 2009; Frattaroli, Thomas, & Lyubomirsky, 2011). While these benefits would be encouraging reasons to consider implementing expressive writing into the classroom at any point in time, they are especially pertinent in the classroom in the midst of this pandemic. At a point in time when nearly everyone is struggling to recover from the same traumatic event, it makes sense to encourage students to process their emotions, as well as to engage in activities that may lead to their academic and personal success both in the first-year writing classroom and beyond.

Conclusion

When I began work on this thesis, I was eager to learn more about the process of expressive writing, and to consider the ways in which this process might be beneficial to others. However, I could not have predicted the interest my thesis topic would garner from my fellow students.

Over the course of my academic career at GSU, I have worked in a variety of different classrooms in a variety of different positions: as a Supplemental Instructor for Environmental Biology and First-year Writing, as a Writing Fellow in the Media Studies Department, and as a Teaching Assistant in First-year Writing and World Literature. As I began my research and work on my thesis, students in these classes would frequently inquire into the topic of this project.

When I explained that I was writing about the ways in which expressive writing helps individuals process trauma, and how expressive writing might be beneficial if implemented into the first-year writing classroom post-COVID-19, I was amazed by the response. Nearly every student I spoke with expressed not only interest in this topic, but further volunteered additional information. Many students enthusiastically agreed that writing expressively was a helpful tool, and one they already used, though, just as I was previously unaware of the research behind this activity, they were likewise unaware of the current academic conversation surrounding expressive writing. Students who already wrote expressively to some degree in their own time frequently told me they did find this helpful, although they were uncertain as to exactly why it helped them and were more often than not eager to hear about the reasons expressive writing might be beneficial. I was both surprised and delighted by the number of questions I would often receive about my topic, and by how many students both already engaged in some form of

expressive writing in their free time, and how many students were interested in learning more about expressive writing overall.

However, one of the greatest and most interesting surprises came in the form of the sheer number of students who immediately asked if I was going to hold an expressive writing experiment here at GSU, and who, before my answer, volunteered to take part in such a study. Multiple students further offered to be interviewed. Several even offered to share their own writing about the COVID-19 pandemic with me for my thesis and asked if they could share it with me regardless of whether or not I wanted to include it in my work. Ultimately, I chose not to include student writing in this thesis, as research has suggested the importance of keeping expressive writing to oneself. However, I was excited to discover how many people were already utilizing expressive writing, how many people were eager to learn more about the subject, and how many people were interested in engaging in discourse surrounding expressive writing.

These reactions from my fellow students, more than any of the research I have read over the course of work on my thesis, solidified in my mind that the implementation of expressive writing activities into the classroom would not only be beneficial, but would be both well-received and successful. My research has led me to understand that expressive writing is helpful to both physical and mental health, and that it is successful often because people instinctively seek to understand themselves and their experiences, and hope to find understanding in others, as well. My conversations with students at GSU have shown me this is entirely true. Students are seeking understanding of themselves and of the world, especially in the aftermath of a global pandemic, just as much as they are striving for academic success. The implementation of expressive writing into the first-year writing classroom may be a step towards helping students achieve both, and much more.

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