

Mood and Flow: Comparing the Benefits of Narrative Versus Poetry Writing

Empirical Studies of the Arts

2016, Vol. 34(2) 177–192

© The Author(s) 2016

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.com/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/0276237416636368

art.sagepub.com



Lauren Fink¹ and Jennifer E. Drake^{1,2}

Abstract

We examined the benefits of a single session of narrative and poetry writing to determine the immediate effects of each on mood and flow. Following a sad mood induction, we randomly assigned participants to a narrative versus poetry format and to an express versus a distract condition. We measured affect before and after writing and asked participants to complete a flow and enjoyment questionnaire after writing. The distract condition improved affect (by increasing positive and decreasing negative affect) more than did the express condition, regardless of writing format. The poetry format resulted in greater enjoyment than the narrative format, but flow did not differ by condition. Results show that, parallel to findings with drawing, writing to distract is a more effective means of mood improvement than writing to express, at least in the short term. Distraction appears to be the driving force leading to greater mood improvement, regardless of writing format.

Keywords

narrative writing, poetry, distraction, expression, flow

We engage in writing on a daily basis—whether it is writing a to-do list, recording an important phone number, or sending a message to a friend. Writing is a familiar and comfortable activity. Aside from its practical use in our everyday lives, writing, specifically expressive writing in which we write about negative

¹Brooklyn College, City University of New York, NY, USA

²Graduate Center, City University of New York, NY, USA

Corresponding Author:

Jennifer E. Drake, Department of Psychology, Brooklyn College, Brooklyn, NY 11210, USA.

Email: jdrake@brooklyn.cuny.edu

events, has been shown to have both psychological and psychophysiological benefits over the long term (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). Research by Pennebaker and colleagues (e.g., Pennebaker, 1997; Pennebaker & Chung, 2011; Smyth, 1998) has demonstrated that expressive writing over several sessions is associated with more positive psychological and psychophysiological outcomes than writing about a neutral topic. These sessions have lasted anywhere from several days to several months (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011), and the benefits have been demonstrated immediately after the last writing session as well as up to 6 months later (Smyth, 1998).

Why is expressive writing beneficial? One possibility is that expressive writing helps us to frame and understand our experiences, promoting feelings of closure and resolution (Pennebaker, 1997). As argued by Timothy Wilson in *Redirect: Changing the Stories We Live By*, “writing forces people to reconstrue whatever is troubling them and find new meaning in it” (Parker-Pope, 2015, p. D6). Traumatic memories are often quite disorganized in nature and are not integrated into an individual’s personal narrative (Smyth, 1998). Instead, these memories are stored as sensory perceptions, ruminations, or reenactments of the event. Transforming traumatic experiences and their accompanying emotions into language requires that features of the experience be encoded and stored in an ordered, logical, and simplified manner (Pennebaker, Mayne, & Francis, 1997). Transforming thoughts and feelings into a linguistic format allows individuals to gain a deeper insight into the personal meaning of their traumatic experiences (Knowles, Wearing, & Campos, 2011). Indeed, Knowles et al. (2011) found that participants who wrote about a traumatic event for four consecutive days increased their use of insight words over the course of writing compared with those who wrote about a neutral topic. One month after writing, participants in the traumatic topic condition also reported fewer illness-related symptoms. This outcome may have been associated with their use of more insight terms, showing that they had gained a deeper understanding of the event.

The research reviewed earlier shows that multiple sessions of expressive writing extended over time are more beneficial than self-distraction by writing about neutral topics. The goal of the research presented here was to determine whether just one session of writing about a distracting topic might have immediate benefits that are greater than one session of expressive writing. Distraction is an emotion regulation strategy that has a positive effect on mood. According to Gross and Thompson (2007), distraction diverts attention away from our negative thoughts and feelings. A distracting task is effective not simply because it causes us to turn away from negative feelings, but because it also requires attention to something else (Van Dillen & Koole, 2007).

As reported by Pennebaker and Chung (2011), while writing about a stressful event is beneficial over time, such writing at first leads to increased levels of negative mood, perhaps because this activity causes people to focus on rather than turn away from negative thoughts. Hemenover, Augustine, Shulman, Tran,

and Barlett (2008) found that when the content of the writing is positive, expressive writing improves mood immediately after one writing session. Pizarro (2004) reported that drawing a still life (after a negative mood induction) was more mood elevating than either drawing or writing about a past stressful event and argued that drawing a still life was certainly more distracting than drawing or writing about a negative event. These findings are consistent with other research showing that distraction is an effective way of coping with negative affect (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008; Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998) because it prevents mood congruent processing (Van Dillen & Koole, 2007). The current study compared expressive writing with writing about a distracting topic and examined the effects after one session. We compared two kinds of writing formats—narrative versus poetry. The use of two writing formats allowed us to explore the possibility that the relative benefits of distraction over expression might be diminished or absent when writing poetry, as writing poetry might lead to more flow, which in turn could boost positive emotions.

Flow is a subjective state which arises when one is deeply engrossed in an activity. In flow, a person can pursue goals that are “clear and compatible” (Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 30). In this state, worries and thoughts begin to dissipate. Flow, therefore, may be associated not only with skill level but also with well-being. Activities that are too easy lead to boredom, those that are too difficult lead to anxiety, but when a balance between challenges and skills occurs, we experience flow and this leads to an increase in positive emotions (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000; Csikszentmihalyi & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Writing poetry may be an activity that leads to flow states and thus to increases in positive affect. Positive affect “reflects the extent to which a person feels enthusiastic, active, and alert” (Watson, Clark, & Tellegen, 1988, p. 1063). Writing poetry has been shown to improve psychological and psychophysiological outcomes. In a small study ($n = 16$), Lowe, Beckett, and Lowe (2003) asked participants to complete three writing conditions (write a positive, negative, or neutral poem) and a control condition (browse magazines). Participants showed improved immune function after writing a positive and negative poem but not after writing a neutral poem or browsing at magazines. This suggests that the benefits occur when writing poetry is accompanied with strong emotions.

It has been speculated that poetry promotes healing by providing a safe medium for individuals to express their pain (Fraser, 2011). Unlike narrative writing which allows individuals to integrate their emotional experience, poetry allows us to stay in the present moment (Floyd, 2003) and staying in the moment may lead to flow. Accordingly, Anderson (1999) argued that the potential benefits of poetry may be derived from the use of carefully constructed words, mental imagery, and rhythm.

Recent research has found that poetry writing over several sessions is associated with increased creativity and flow. In one study, participants were asked

to write a haiku poem about one of the three topics—nature, a neutral topic (describe the psychology building) or a negative life event—or a narrative about a neutral topic (the same topic as the neutral haiku poem) for three consecutive days (Stephenson & Rosen, 2015). Participants completed questionnaires on their psychological symptoms and creativity 3 weeks after the intervention. Those who wrote about a neutral topic in a narrative format showed the greatest decreases in anxiety and depression at the 3-week follow-up. However, those who wrote in the haiku poem format about nature or a negative life event showed the greatest increases in creativity at the 3-week follow-up, as measured by the Creativity Personality Scale. In another study, participants were asked to write about their anxieties or a control topic in the form of narrative writing or poetry once a week for 3 weeks (Floyd, 2003). While the expressive conditions (both narrative and poetry) reduced feelings of rumination, only the expressive poetry condition resulted in a greater experience of flow. It appears that while three sessions of narrative writing about negative personal events reduced negative feelings, the same frequency of poetry writing about negative experiences had the benefit of increasing feelings of flow.

In the study reported here, we asked whether when an individual reflects on negative life events, writing about something distracting might improve mood immediately after one session, much as has been shown for drawing (Dalebroux, Goldstein, & Winner, 2008; Drake & Winner, 2012). We also asked whether, irrespective of whether the content of the writing distracts an individual away from negative feelings or allows for the expression of these feelings, writing in the form of poetry might lead to greater mood improvement than writing in the form of prose. We thought this might be the case because when writing poetry one can focus not only on the semantics of the words but also on their formal properties (e.g., sound, rhythm, etc.). In this sense, writing poetry might distract the individual away from a sole focus on the content of the words. Moreover, a focus on form as well as on content might make the poetry task more engaging. We asked these questions not only with respect to mood improvement but also with respect to enjoyment and flow.

After a sad mood induction, we asked participants to engage in one session of narrative writing or one session of poetry writing, with the topic being either a negative life event or a neutral topic. We asked participants to create a poem but did not give any instructions in terms of rhyme or structure. We did this to allow participants freedom in writing their poems. We measured positive and negative affect before and after the activity and asked participants to complete a flow and enjoyment questionnaire. In contrast to the work by Pennebaker and colleagues, we compared the benefits of a single session of narrative or poetry writing. This allowed us to test whether expressive writing in the form of a poem could improve mood immediately. We also analyzed the content of the writings to ensure that participants were following our instructions.

We hypothesized that for the narrative writing format, the distract condition would be associated with greater mood improvement, enjoyment, and flow than the express condition, replicating previous research on distraction and drawing. But in the case of poetry writing, we hypothesized that the distract and express conditions would result in similar levels of mood improvement, enjoyment, and flow. Our reasoning was that poetry forces the writer to focus on form, which might distract the writer from the semantic content (negative thoughts). Thus, poetry writing, regardless of content (negative or neutral), may improve mood equivalently.

Method

Participants

Eighty-five undergraduates (64 women and 21 men) ranging in age from 18 to 47 ($M=21.4$; $SD=5.7$) were recruited and received credit as part of a course requirement. The sample was 40.0% White, 24.7% Asian, 16.5% Black or African American, 9.4% Other, 8.2% Hispanic/Latino, and 1.2% Biracial. The study was approved by the college's institutional review board, and all participants provided written informed consent.

Measures

Mood induction. In order to induce a sad mood, we asked participants to think of the saddest event they had ever experienced and to record the event on a sheet of paper. Participants were then guided through a 3-minute visual imagery task (developed by Rusting & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1998). The visual imagery task asked them to focus on the sights, sounds, thoughts, and feelings evoked by the sad event they had recalled.

Activity. Participants were randomly assigned to one of the four conditions: express narrative, express poetry, distract narrative, or distract poetry. There were no differences in the gender distribution between conditions ($\chi^2=0.098$, $p=.754$) or writing formats ($\chi^2=0.004$, $p=.948$). There were 42 (31 females and 11 males) participants in the express condition and 43 (33 females and 10 males) participants in the distract condition. Participants were given a pen and a blank 9" \times 11" sheet of lined paper and asked to write for 10 minutes.

In previous studies, the time allotted for the writing paradigm ranged from 10 to 30 minutes (Pennebaker & Chung, 2011). A meta-analysis by Smyth (1998) found no effect for the duration of the writing session, while Frattaroli's (2006) more recent meta-analysis found that effects were strongest when participants wrote for 15 minutes or more. Still, Burton and King (2008) found effects when participants wrote for just 2 minutes a day. We were interested in whether the

simple act of writing over a short time period could improve mood and therefore asked participants to write for 10 minutes.

Those in the express narrative condition were instructed as follows: “I want you to describe the event you recalled. I want you to write as a way to focus on, feel, and make sense of the experience you recalled. Use the writing activity as a way to express your thoughts and feelings.” Those in the distract narrative condition were instructed as follows: “I want you to describe your living room. I want you to describe your living room as a way to focus, depict, and make sense of the setting. Use the writing activity as a way to help you describe the setting.”

Those in the express poetry condition were instructed as follows: “I want you to describe a scene in the form of a poem about the event you recalled. I want you to write as a way to focus on, feel, and make sense of the experience you recalled. Use the writing activity as a way to express your thoughts and feelings.” Those in the distract poetry condition were instructed as follows: “I want you to describe a scene in the form of a poem about your living room. I want you to describe your living room as a way to focus, depict, and make sense of the setting. Use the writing activity as a way to help you describe the setting.” See Table 1 for samples from each writing format and condition.

We also analyzed the content of the writings to ensure that participants were adhering to the writing prompts. One experimenter (who was blind to the assigned condition and study hypotheses) read the writing samples and categorized the samples with respect to writing format (narrative or poetry) and condition (express or distract). The same experimenter also scored the writings for

Table 1. Writing Samples by Writing Format and Condition.

Express narrative

It was after midnight when the death occurred. Everyone was in shock and I had no clue because they were trying to prevent me from finding out. I knew what happened but I didn't want to actually hear it.

Express poem

My son –
My baby taken away from me.
The hurt, the pain—I will never see his
cute face again . . .
Like a real-life movie, a horror scene—
No ending, no intermission, not a
dream

Distract narrative

My living room is small. There are two
couches across from each other and
they are brown leather. The carpet is
black and beige and brown designs.
There is a black table with a flat
screen T.V. on it.

Distract poem

Books lookin' from shelves sunshine
through a dark window
Old wood in the floor
Remain events from the past
Light dances on bright red walls
To the bird's lullaby

the percentage of positive and negative emotion words used. Interrater reliability was performed on 28% of the samples (six for each group), $r = .856$ for the positive emotion words and $r = .989$ for the negative emotion words.

Positive and Negative Affect Schedule. To measure affect, we administered the Positive and Negative Affect Schedule (PANAS; Watson et al., 1988). The PANAS contains a list of 20 words (10 positive and 10 negative) that describe different feelings and emotions (e.g., interested, excited, distressed, and upset). Participants were asked to indicate, for each word, the extent to which they were feeling that emotion on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*very slightly or not at all*) to 5 (*extremely*). The PANAS yields a global score for positive affect and negative affect. Participants completed the PANAS before (Time 1) and after (Time 2) the writing activity. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was as follows: Time 1 positive affect $\alpha = .86$ and negative affect $\alpha = .78$; Time 2 positive affect $\alpha = .90$ and negative affect $\alpha = .87$.

Flow State Scale. To measure the level of flow participants experienced during the writing activity, we administered the Flow State Scale (Jackson & Marsh, 1996). Participants were presented with 36 statements (e.g., "I felt like I could control what I was doing," "The way time passed seemed to be different from normal," and "The challenge and my skills were at an equally high level") and were asked to rate how much they experienced each statement during the writing activity on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*always*). The Flow State Scale yields an overall flow score as well as nine subscales. Cronbach's alpha for this measure was as follows: overall flow ($\alpha = .92$) and for the nine subscales—level of challenge ($\alpha = .76$), action awareness ($\alpha = .83$), clear goals ($\alpha = .78$), unambiguous feedback ($\alpha = .87$), concentration ($\alpha = .85$), control ($\alpha = .89$), loss of self-consciousness ($\alpha = .87$), transformation time ($\alpha = .65$), and autotelic experience ($\alpha = .91$).

Enjoyment. Participants were asked to rate how much they enjoyed the writing activity on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*really didn't*) to 5 (*really did*).

Procedure

Participants were seen individually in a small quiet room with one experimenter. They were first asked to recall the saddest event they had ever experienced. After recalling the sad event, participants were asked to complete the PANAS (Time 1). Next, participants carried out the writing activity in their assigned condition. They then completed the PANAS a second time (Time 2) and completed the Flow State Scale and rated their level of enjoyment during the writing activity. A baseline PANAS was not included in our study to avoid introducing a demand characteristic (Young, Adelstein, & Ellis, 2006). Finally, participants were

provided a debriefing form with the principal investigator's contact information. Because they were asked to think about a sad life event, we also provided information on how to contact the college counseling services if they were distressed as a result of participation.

Results

Preliminary Results

Tables 2 and 3 present the mean positive and negative affect scores, respectively, for Time 1 and Time 2 by condition and writing format. A univariate analysis of variance (ANOVA) performed on word count by condition (2) and writing format (2) revealed an effect of writing format, $F(1, 81) = 106.064$, $p < .001$,

Table 2. Mean Positive Affect by Condition and Writing Format at Time 1 and Time 2.

Condition	N	Time 1		Time 2	
		M	SE	M	SE
Express					
Narrative	20	16.3	2.3	17.1	2.8
Poem	22	20.7	1.8	24.4	2.2
Distract					
Narrative	20	18.3	1.8	22.4	2.1
Poem	22	20.7	2.0	30.2	2.4

Note. SE = standard error. Means and standard error presented are controlled for word count.

Table 3. Mean Negative Affect by Condition and Writing Format at Time 1 and Time 2.

Condition	N	Time 1		Time 2	
		M	SE	M	SE
Express					
Narrative	20	24.5	2.1	22.6	2.0
Poem	22	19.7	1.6	20.0	1.6
Distract					
Narrative	20	23.1	1.6	13.0	1.6
Poem	22	22.4	1.8	14.4	1.8

Note. SE = standard error. Means and standard error presented are controlled for word count.

$n_p^2 = 0.567$, and condition, $F(1, 81) = 15.157, p < .001, n_p^2 = 0.158$. Specifically, those in the narrative format ($M = 201.8$) condition wrote more than those in the poetry format ($M = 95.1$); and those in the express condition ($M = 168.6$) wrote more than those in the distract condition ($M = 128.3$). Thus, we included word count in our analyses to determine whether this had any effect.

Mood Improvement

Positive affect. To compare the effectiveness of the express versus distract condition in increasing positive affect, we performed a repeated measures ANOVA with writing format (2) and condition (2) as between-subjects factors, time as the repeated measure variable, and word count as a covariate. There was no effect of time, $F(1, 80) = 0.396, p = .531, n_p^2 = 0.005$ or condition, $F(1, 80) = 3.179, p = .078, n_p^2 = 0.038$. There was an effect of writing format, $F(1, 80) = 4.547, p = .036, n_p^2 = 0.054$: those in the poetry format reported higher positive affect than did those in the narrative format.

Time interacted with condition, $F(1, 80) = 6.484, p = .013, n_p^2 = 0.075$ (Figure 1). To understand the interaction, we computed a change score for mood improvement by subtracting positive affect before from positive affect after writing. As discussed by Zumbo (1999), the use of a difference score is an adequate measure to reflect change. Next, we conducted an ANOVA by condition with the change score as the dependent variable. Those in the distract

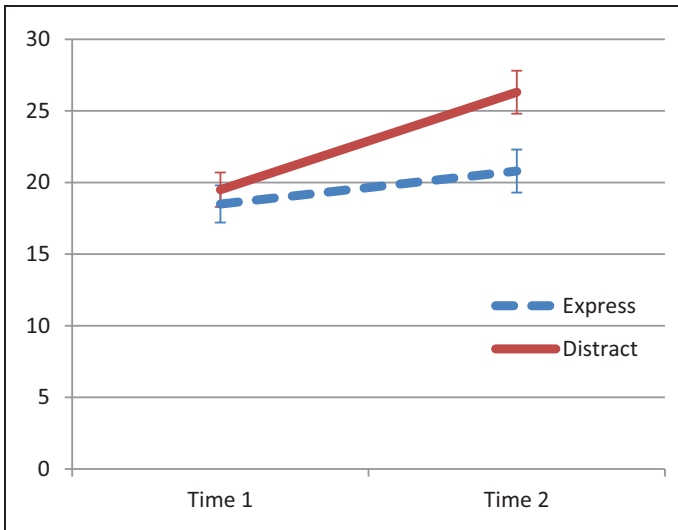


Figure 1. Mean positive affect by condition and time (controlling for word count).

condition ($M = 6.5$) experienced a greater increase in positive affect after writing than did those in the express condition ($M = 2.7$), $F(1, 83) = 5.367$, $p = .023$, $d = 0.51$.

There was no effect of word count, no two-way interaction of time with writing format, time with word count, writing format with condition, and no three-way interaction of time with writing format and condition, $ps > .05$

Negative affect. To compare the effectiveness of the express versus distract condition in decreasing negative affect, we performed a repeated measures ANOVA with writing format (2) and condition (2) as between-subjects factors, time as the repeated-measure variable, and word count as a covariate. There was an effect of time, $F(1, 80) = 7.491$, $p = .008$, $n_p^2 = .086$: negative affect decreased from before ($M = 22.4$) to after writing ($M = 17.5$). There was no effect of writing format, $F(1, 80) = 0.723$, $p = .398$, $n_p^2 = 0.009$. There was an effect of condition, $F(1, 80) = 6.034$, $p = .016$, $n_p^2 = 0.070$: those in the distract condition reported lower negative affect than did those in the express condition.

More importantly, there was again an interaction of time with condition, $F(1, 80) = 23.996$, $p < .001$, $n_p^2 = 0.231$ (Figure 2). We again computed a change score for mood improvement by subtracting negative affect before writing from negative affect after writing and conducted an ANOVA by condition with the change score as the dependent variable. Mirroring the findings for positive affect, those in the distract condition ($M = 9.3$) experienced a greater

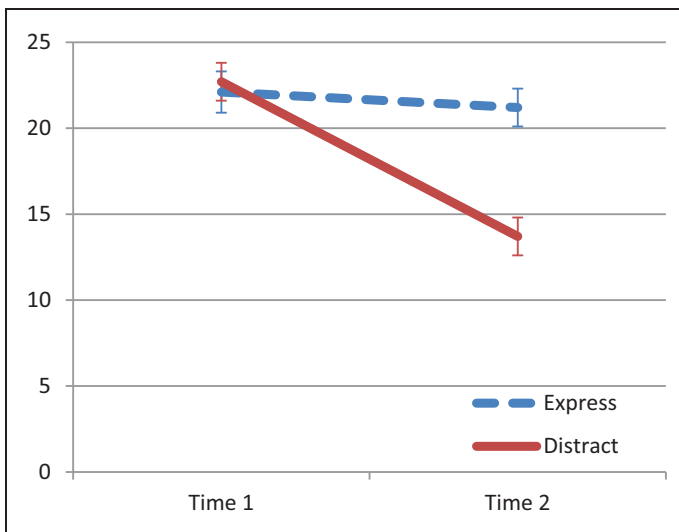


Figure 2. Mean negative affect by condition and time (controlling for word count).

decrease in negative affect after writing than did those in the express condition ($M=0.5$), $F(1, 83)=33.484$, $p < .001$, $d=1.3$. There was no effect of word count, no two-way interaction of time with writing format, time with word count, writing format with condition, and no three-way interaction of time with writing format and condition, $ps > .05$

Flow and Enjoyment

To assess whether enjoyment and overall flow differed by writing format and condition, we performed a multivariate ANOVA with writing format and condition as the between-subjects factors, overall flow and enjoyment as the dependent variables, and word count as a covariate. Those who wrote a poem ($M=3.9$) enjoyed the experience more than those who wrote a narrative ($M=2.8$), $F(1, 80)=7.856$, $p = .006$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.089$. There was no effect for condition or interaction of writing format and condition for enjoyment. There were no main effects or interactions for flow.

Controlling for Gender

When the statistical analyses were performed with gender as a covariate, the effect of time on negative affect was no longer significant. The other results remained unchanged. There was no effect of gender and no interaction between time and gender. More importantly, the interaction between time and condition remained significant.

Content of Writing Samples

We found that all participants did indeed follow the writing prompts with regard to both writing format and condition. We also examined whether the percentage of positive and negative words differed by writing format and condition. We performed a multivariate ANOVA with writing format and condition as the between-subjects factors and percentage of positive words and percentage of negative words as the dependent variables. The percentage of positive words did not differ by writing format or condition. However, those in the narrative format had a higher percentage of negative words than those in the poetry format, $F(1, 81)=4.878$, $p = .030$, $\eta_p^2 = .057$, and those in the express condition had a higher percentage of negative words than those in the distract condition, $F(1, 81)=55.552$, $p < .001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.407$.

Discussion

Do the benefits of writing to distract (over writing to express) persist when participants are asked to write a poem or does writing to distract and writing

to express result in the same mood benefits when the format is a poem? We compared mood improvement and flow when writing to distract versus writing to express in a narrative versus poetry format. We asked participants to think of the saddest event they had ever experienced. Participants then used writing to distract or express in a narrative or poetry format. We examined whether affect, flow, or enjoyment differed by condition.

Consistent with our hypothesis, after one session, writing to distract improved positive and negative affect more than writing to express. This finding replicates previous research showing that distraction is an effective way of coping with negative affect (Fredrickson & Cohn, 2008; Fredrickson & Levenson, 1998). We might expect that a single session of writing is too short to counteract a negative mood. However, our results show that even a single session of writing can improve mood when used as a form of distraction. Thus, distraction from a sad memory should be considered an adaptive coping mechanism because it likely prevents mood-congruent memories (Lischetzke & Eid, 2003) and leads to increases in affect. This is especially true for individuals who are unable to regulate their emotions. Focusing on negative affect can lead to increased rumination and unsuccessful regulatory attempts (Lischetzke & Eid, 2003). A way for individuals to improve their negative mood is to engage in an active, distractive response that redirects attention away from the source of the negative mood (Morrow & Nolen-Hoeksema, 1990). This is consistent with research showing that drawing to distract improves mood more than drawing to express after a single session (Dalebroux et al., 2008; Drake & Winner, 2012; Pizarro, 2004).

We hypothesized that writing a poem would improve mood more than writing in narrative form because the poetry format forces participants to focus on form as well as content and may therefore be more mood elevating. Support was not found for this hypothesis. Why might there be no differences between the narrative and poetry formats? One possibility is the structure of our poetry task. We asked participants to write a poem without any instructions on the rhythm or structure of the poem. We did this not only to allow participants freedom in their writings but also to equate the poem with the narrative task. In the narrative format, participants were given a topic but were not given instructions on how to structure their writings (other than to describe the event or their living room). While some participants may have found the lack of structure for the poetry format liberating, others may have found this too difficult and would have benefited from a more structured format. Previous research has found that writing a haiku poem (i.e., a poem comprised three lines and 11 words) about nature led to greater decreases in anxiety after several weeks than writing in a narrative format (Stephenson & Rosen, 2015). Thus, differences might have been found between the narrative and poetry formats if participants had been asked to write a poem in a structured format.

Those in the poetry condition experienced greater enjoyment than those in the narrative condition, but contrary to our hypothesis, overall flow did not differ by

condition. It is possible that a more engaging distraction task would have resulted in higher levels of flow. While this has not been examined with flow, recent research on creativity supports this idea: Stephenson and Rosen (2015) found that both writing a poem about nature and a negative life event resulted in increases in creativity (as measured by a self-report creativity measure). The nature task may have been more engaging than writing about a living room. Future research should examine whether a poem about a more engaging neutral topic results in greater levels of flow than writing about an emotionally upsetting event. Our findings apply to writing after a single session. Future research should continue to examine the mood and flow benefits of writing after several sessions. As Smyth determined in his 1998 meta-analysis, the benefits of writing are strongest over longer periods of time and the same may be true for poetry.

With regard to the content of the writings, we found that participants did adhere to the instructions and were able to communicate effectively. While the percentage of positive words used did not differ by writing format or condition, the percentage of negative words did. Those in the narrative format and in the express condition had a higher percentage of negative words than those in the poetry format and in the distract condition. The use of more negative words may explain the differences between the express and distract condition. The express condition used more negative words and this may have led to rumination. However, the percentage of negative words was still very low. Almost half of participants did not use any negative or positive words in their writing, and the greatest percentage of negative words was still quite low at about 7% of the total words used.

Finally, writing as a form of mood regulation requires that individuals be able to express themselves through words. This may be difficult for those who are not comfortable writing, who are still mastering this skill (e.g., children), or who are unable to express themselves through words. For these individuals, other art forms may be more beneficial. For example, the nonverbal activity of drawing may be a far more effective way for children (who may be less proficient in writing) to process and cope with their emotions. Indeed, research has shown that drawing is an effective way for children to regulate their emotions (Drake & Winner, 2013). Children and adults may also benefit from engaging with fiction, whether it be reading a novel or watching a film. As argued by Oatley (2011) in *Such Stuff as Dreams: The Psychology of Fiction*, fiction allows us to experience and understand our emotions through fictional characters. A similar study could be conducted on the healing power of reading fiction, particularly for the kinds of emotions we experience in everyday life (e.g., sadness, fear, and disappointment).

Our findings demonstrate the immediate benefits of writing in improving mood. In the short term, writing as a way to distract from negative feelings improves mood more than writing to express one's feelings in the short term.

And, this is true regardless of the writing format used—poetry or narrative writing. Distraction seems to be the driving force behind immediate mood improvement. The power of writing to improve mood is one more reason for the importance of the humanities in education.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding

The authors received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

References

- Anderson, R. N. (1999). The healing powers of creativity: Using poetry in psychotherapy. *The Journal of Individual Psychology, 55*, 257–265.
- Burton, C. M., & King, L. A. (2008). Effects of (very) brief writing on health: The two-minute miracle. *British Journal of Health Psychology, 13*, 9–14. doi:10.1348/135910707X250910
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding flow: The psychology of engagement with everyday life*. New York, NY: Basic Books.
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. (2000). The costs of benefits of consuming. *Journal of Consumer Research, 27*, 267–272. doi:10.1086/314324
- Csikszentmihalyi, M. & Csikszentmihalyi, I. S. (Eds.). (2000). *Optimal experience: Psychological studies of flow in consciousness*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.
- Dalebroux, A., Goldstein, T. R., & Winner, E. (2008). Short-term mood repair through art-making: Positive emotion is more effective than venting. *Motivation and Emotion, 32*, 288–295. doi:10.1007/s11031-008-9105-1
- Drake, J. E., & Winner, E. (2012). Confronting sadness through art-making: Distraction is more beneficial than venting. *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity, and the Arts, 6*, 251–266. doi:10.1037/a0026909
- Drake, J. E., & Winner, E. (2013). How children use drawing to regulate their emotions. *Cognition and Emotion, 27*, 512–520. doi:10.1080/02699931.2012.720567
- Floyd, R. K. (2003). *Composing ourselves: Writing narrative and writing poetry as psychological interventions using the Pennebaker paradigm*. Lawrence: University of Kansas.
- Fraser, D. (2011). Mood disorders and poetry: Archeology of the self. *Journal of Poetry Therapy, 24*(2), 105–115. doi:10.1080/08893675.2011.573288
- Frattaroli, J. (2006). Experimental disclosure and moderators: A meta-analysis. *Psychological Bulletin, 132*, 823–865. doi:10.1037/0033-2909.132.6.823
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Cohn, M. A. (2008). Positive emotions. In M. Lewis, J. M. Haviland-Jones & L. F. Barrett (Eds.) *Handbook of emotions* (3rd., pp. 777–796). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Fredrickson, B. L., & Levenson, R. W. (1998). Positive emotions speed recovery from the cardiovascular sequelae of negative emotions. *Cognition and Emotion, 12*, 191–220. doi:10.1080/026999398379718

- Gross, J. J., & Thompson, R. A. (2007). Emotion regulation: Conceptual foundations. In J. J. Gross (Ed.), *Handbook of emotion regulation* (pp. 3–24). New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Hemenover, S. H., Augustine, A. A., Shulman, T., Tran, T. Q., & Barlett, C. P. (2008). Individual differences in negative affect repair. *Emotion, 8*(4), 468–478. doi:10.1037/1528-3542.8.4.468
- Jackson, S. A., & Marsh, H. W. (1996). Development and validation of a scale to measure optimal experience: The flow state scale. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology, 18*, 17–35.
- Knowles, E. D., Wearing, J. R., & Campos, B. (2011). Culture and the health benefits of expressive writing. *Social Psychological and Personality Science, 2*(4), 408–415. doi:10.1177/1948550610395780
- Lischetzke, T., & Eid, M. (2003). Is attention to feelings beneficial or detrimental to affective well-being? Mood regulation as a moderator variable. *Emotion, 3*, 361–377. doi:10.1037/1528-3542.3.4.361
- Lowe, G., Beckett, J., & Lowe, G. M. (2003). Poetry writing and secretory immunoglobulin A. *Psychological Reports, 92*, 847–848. doi:10.2466/PR.92.3.847-848
- Morrow, J., & Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (1990). Effects of responses to depression on the remediation of depressive affect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 58*(3), 519–527. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.58.3.519
- Oatley, K. (2011). *Such stuff as dreams: The psychology of fiction*. Oxford, UK: Wiley Blackwell.
- Parker-Pope, T. (2015, January 15). Writing your way to happiness. *The New York Times*. Retrieved from http://well.blogs.nytimes.com/2015/01/19/writing-your-way-to-happiness/?_r=0
- Pennebaker, J. (1997). *Opening up: The healing power of expressing emotions*. New York, NY: Guilford Press.
- Pennebaker, J. W., & Chung, C. K. (2011). Expressive writing: Connections to physical and mental health. In H. S. Friedman (Ed.), *The Oxford handbook of health psychology* (pp. 417–437). New York, NY: Oxford University Press doi:10.1093/oxfordhb/9780195342819.013.0018
- Pennebaker, J. W., Mayne, T., & Francis, M. (1997). Linguistic predictors of adaptive bereavement. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 72*, 863–871. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.72.4.863
- Pizarro, J. (2004). The efficacy of art and writing therapy: Increasing positive mental health outcomes and participant retention after exposure to traumatic experience. *Art Therapy: Journal of the American Art Therapy Association, 21*(1), 5–12. doi:10.1080/07421656.2004.10129327
- Rusting, C. L., & Nolen-Hoeksema, S. (1998). Regulating responses to anger: Effects of rumination and distraction on angry mood. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 74*, 790–803. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.74.3.790
- Smyth, J. M. (1998). Written emotional expression: Effect sizes, outcome types, and moderating variables. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology, 66*(1), 174–184. doi:10.1037/0022-006X.66.1.174
- Stephenson, K., & Rosen, D. H. (2015). Haiku and healing: An empirical study of poetry writing as a therapeutic and creative intervention. *Empirical Studies of the Arts, 33*, 33–60. doi:10.1177/02762374155699811

- Van Dillen, L. F., & Koole, S. L. (2007). Clearing the mind: A working memory model of distraction from negative mood. *Emotion, 7*, 715–723. doi:10.1037/1528-3542.7.4.715
- Watson, D., Clark, L. A., & Tellegen, A. (1988). Development and validation of brief measures of positive and negative affect: The PANAS Scales. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 54*, 1063–1070. doi:10.1037/0022-3514.54.6.1063
- Young, S. D., Adelstein, B. D., & Ellis, S. R. (2006). *Demand characteristics of a questionnaire used to assess motion sickness in a virtual environment*. IEEE Virtual Reality Conference, 25–29 March, 97–102. doi:10.1109/VR.2006.44
- Zumbo, B. D. (1999). The simple difference score as an inherently poor measure of change: Some reality, much mythology. In B. Thompson (Ed.), *Advances in social science methodology* (Vol 5, pp. 269–304). Greenwich, CT: JAI Press.

Author Biographies

Lauren Fink received her B.S. in Psychology and Biology from Brooklyn College, CUNY. She is currently a medical student at New York Medical College.

Jennifer E. Drake is an Assistant Professor in the Psychology Department at Brooklyn College, CUNY. Her research focuses on emotion regulation, drawing giftedness, and visual thinking.