



*Tell Your Story Newsletter (TYSN):*

Specializing in Entrepreneurial and Organizational Storytelling

*Let me tell your story!*

**Welcome Mid-April, 2019!**

As spring develops in Saskatchewan, we long for more sunshine and less frigid winds. But the winter of 2019 (which felt like 10 in one) has passed: what a relief!

Since last July, I have participated in daily seminars and weekly coaching as a protege of the Praxis School of Entrepreneurship--conducting local marketing research, identifying a broader client base, and determining which writing and editing services will suit you, my clients, best.

Eleven days ago, I completed the last panel presentation of the program and look forward to graduation and renewing networking activities!

Since re-launching my business last January with the support of Praxis, I have been developing career document workshops and writing services to under-served communities, including international students, new Canadians and other rapidly growing sectors.

What projects are you working on, this springtime, and do you need a writer's and editor's eyes and hands to help?

May the increasing light and warmth this season bring you renewed good health, accomplishment in your work and gratitude for the blessings (people, projects and more) that grace your life.

Sincerely,  
*Elizabeth*

Principal  
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## **Article One, on Entrepreneurial Wellness: What is Expressive Writing and What Can it Do for Us (with Dr. Jamie Pennebaker)?**

Some months ago, the accountant of the Praxis School of Entrepreneurship, Pat Thomas (CPA, CA), recommended to me the writing of Dr. James (“Jamie”) Pennebaker, the research psychologist (U of Texas at Austin) who has been the founding researcher into the therapeutic function of writing for those coping with trauma and loss.

Pennebaker’s seminal book on the topic is called *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma and Emotional Upheaval* (2004/2014). As its title suggests, the book is part explication and part workbook of exercises for those who wish to recover from pain and upheaval in their lives. And who among us couldn’t benefit from that?

In research that began in the 1980s, Pennebaker and his associates tested the effects of four consecutive days of “expressive writing” on college age adults. The “expressive writing” refers to a method of self-directed journalling about a trauma, loss or painful experience that the subjects recalled as a significant upheaval in their lives. The subjects were encouraged to write in a 15 minute session on a single traumatic event or issue, on four consecutive days, submitting their work anonymously at the end of each session. (The control group were subjects who were instructed to write about superficial topics, such as on the shoes they were wearing on the given day.)

Those in the expressive writing groups reported 43% fewer visits to the doctor than the control groups who wrote on only superficial topics (such as to describe the shoes they were wearing that day). Emotional writing was also tied to an increased capacity to think about complex tasks and therefore improved the subjects’ performance at school and at work. (Other research has shown that trauma occurring in youth that is not described and treated can create a 40%+ increase in medical visits in later life.)

Besides creating improved cognitive functioning, Pennebaker and others have published that expressive writing about trauma has been shown to improve immune function, lower blood pressure and heart rate levels.

Many subjects reported that the writing changed their lives: initially they felt sadness and even cried, after a session. But most found that subsided quickly and was replaced by greater benefits: falling asleep faster, sleeping better, feeling healthier, with fewer aches and pains, drinking less alcohol, taking fewer painkillers, eating better and getting more exercise.

Subjects also reported improved capacities to relate to others, and enhanced social lives. While Pennebaker suggests that patients engage in expressive writing when they are relatively calm and stable (not when they feel at risk of “flipping out”—i.e. are in an acute crisis), writing at an optimal time could enhance the mental and physical health of virtually anyone. (Pennebaker says

that in only two cases over the 20 years of running his clinical trials was it necessary to take subjects to see a clinical psychologist.)

My initial concern with reading Pennebaker's research was that, as a wise psychotherapist once told me, "The page has no empathic response." Writing itself for many people wouldn't suffice to replace the "talking and listening cure" of psychotherapy and psychoanalysis, in which a good, live therapist mirrors back the patient's experience and provides insights that help to transform that patient's psyche.

But Pennebaker himself acknowledges that expressive writing can function in a complementary way to the acute treatment involved in "talk therapy," and even continue as a method of self-care for patients, after their formal treatments ends.

Here, for easy reading, are some of the insights on expressive writing that Pennebaker describes in the book:

- "Writing is only beneficial if you are trying to make sense of an event you don't understand" (57).
- After completing the four sessions (some of which were lengthier in duration), most subjects reported thinking less about the trauma than they had earlier.
- There is no absolute right way to disclose traumatic experiences.
- Subjects say that they had found fewer disagreements with others and were more open to relationship with them, were getting their work done faster and better and felt a greater sense of meaning in their lives.
- Expressive writers can change perspectives (i.e. change pronouns from "I" to "She," etc.) on the event that they depict and use contrasting points-of-view, to include people involved in the writing. The contributions of others in the exchange could intensify and/or alleviate the subject's pain. Pennebaker says that acknowledging both the bad and the good of the experience correlates with improved mental health.
- He recommends trying to include some positive emotions, since traumas can remind us of the positive things in life, while moderating the number of negative emotional words.
- Pennebaker stresses that "virtually all personal upheavals are social. A traumatic event may happen just to you, but almost always it also affects others, either directly or indirectly . . . . [A]nother person was involved in the unfolding of your trauma, so if you can bear witness to that in your writing, your potential for meaning and recovery will increase."
- A subject can write for a different audience each of the four day (challenge) and can change the place and time of the writing, to help to gain access to their emotions.
- In chapters 4-10, he includes other forms of expressive writing (e.g. stream-of-consciousness and semi-automatic writing), as methods that lull the conscious mind to release hidden thoughts and insights, analogous to a "talking and listening cure." Here, the writing process could be guided by a psychotherapist or psychologist, as a supplementary process to more traditional therapy.
- Self-maintaining expressive writing does apply storytelling practices: Pennebaker says that people recover even better from traumas if they can build a coherent story of their

experiences. He notes that what “may be a good story” for one person may seem “superficial or deluded to another.”

- But basic elements would include:

(i) A description of the setting when and where the event occurred;

(ii) A sense of the main characters and what they were thinking and feeling before and after the event;

(iii) A clear description of the event or upheaval and how the subject reacted, as it unfolded;

(iv) A description of the immediate and long-term results—what happened due to the event? How did it shape your current situation and emotions;

(v) The meaning of the story—Why does the subject tell this story to herself or to others? Why has it had such an effect on her and what has she learned from her experience of it?

- The goal is to “work through your trauma; do not wrap yourself into it,” Pennebaker writes.
- Many of the subjects of his study say that writing changed their lives. Pennebaker observes that when a sense of boredom arises, after repeating the upsetting event, even with the differences that arise between sessions, the mind indicates that it has put the trauma to rest and wants the subject to move on.
- The subject should hide or even destroy their writings, once they have finished with them, to avoid others’ disapproval that could complicate their emotional recovery.
- A subject can write about others’ traumatic events or even about a tragedy in the newspaper to help them to get relief from their emotional issues, which can also increase one’s self-compassion and compassion for others.

Writing prompts that Pennebaker uses could help any writer who feels blocked or stuck in their writing—something that Julia Cameron and others (“morning pages”) have not shared.

Graduate students who struggle with thesis writing could find these questions helpful:

(i) I’m sitting here unable to write about \_\_\_\_\_. Why am I having trouble writing about this?

(ii) Thinking about this topic raises a number of disconnected thoughts, including \_\_\_\_\_.

(iii) In life, there have been other times that I’ve been blocked about writing. How is this time similar? What is it about me that won’t let me get started?

(iv) The topic raises a lot of emotions in me. Some of them include \_\_\_\_\_.

*And now it's your turn: Do you think that expressive writing could help you achieve insight into painful losses or experiences of the past? Why not look up Pennebaker's workbook and practice the writing exercises he has pioneered?*



### **STORYTELLER'S CORNER: Words, Stories, Riddles and Jokes on Writing and Editing . . .**

Editors in our local community have often laughed at the punctuation errors of writers. Here are three examples where the failure to use punctuation produces funny and/or infuriating results!

#### **Punctuation Matters** (in both senses!):

- (1) Notice the difference between "Let's eat Grandma!" and "Let's eat, Grandma!"
- (2) Similarly a well-placed comma turns "I like cooking my family and pets" into "I like cooking, my family and pets."
- (3) And most of you will recall the age-old (infuriating) example in which an English professor challenged his/her class to punctuate the following sentence:

"A woman without her man is nothing" . . . .

Some male writers are said to have written this: "A woman, without her man, is nothing."

Some female writers are said to have written this: "A woman: without her, man is nothing."

### **SHOP NEWS:**

This issue of TYSN is dedicated to the memory of **Donald (Don) Onclin**, long-time engineer, Presbyterian member of session, avid golfer and opera lover, service club devotee, and, above all, family man.

Don recently departed the earth after years of struggling with Chronic Obstructive Pulmonary Disease (COPD). My extended family are indebted to him and to Marina, his wife, for their wise counsel, generous spirits and wonderful sense of humour! We offer our condolences to Marina and family and already miss Don greatly.

Special thanks to business coach Deanna Litz, mentor Monica Kreuger and the team at The Praxis School of Entrepreneurship. The last eight (nearly nine) months have been a tremendous learning opportunity, for which I remain very grateful. It has been extraordinary to observe and receive

insights from this team of highly gifted women and one man! And a particular shout-out to bookkeeper Marie Weinkauff for sharing her knowledge of Sage50, close to the time of final presentations.

And a definite nod to colleagues Megan Kent, Jordon MacKenzie and Joan Kleinsteuber who have shared their entrepreneurial training experiences with me (and I with them), during the past eight months. These folk, along with earlier Praxis alumni, will serve our community and beyond with their skills and passion!

A hearty thanks also, this month, goes to Chartered Accountant, Pat Thomas, for recommending (Prof.) Jamie Pennebaker's books, including *Writing to Heal* (2004/2014) that spawned this month's article.

And special thanks, too, to friends who are assisting me with relocating my home and home office. I'm especially thankful for their support, when moving creates stress!

## **ABOUT US:**

Between 2011 and December 2018, Elizabeth Shih Communications chronicled the stories of B2B marketing and communications on the Prairies and across the country.

Effective January 1, 2019, I have rebranded as "Storytelling Communications." I now write career and communications documents and lead workshops that help newcomers (and others) land better jobs; I help SMEs to close more sales by communicating more effectively; and I write books that help promote the legacies of major companies and not-for-profit groups.

Interested in learning more? Please contact me through my CASL-compliant website ([www.elizabethshih.com](http://www.elizabethshih.com)).

After I receive your message, I'll be pleased to discuss projects with you!

Please visit my website for more information ([www.storytellingcommunications.ca](http://www.storytellingcommunications.ca)).