

THE WRITING STUFF

Executive coach **Jackee Holder** demonstrates the value of creative and reflective writing for coaches and how it can facilitate our personal and professional development.

Have you ever felt stuck with a client and at a loss for what to do next? Engaging with reflective writing, whether as part of a coaching session or afterwards as reflective notes, can enhance your practice with your clients and, at the same time, grow and develop your skills as a coach.

Reflective writing is not the same as writing essays or grammatically correct pieces of prose. Over time it can develop your creative problem-solving skills and accelerate your ability to consciously access your unconscious thoughts through free association and free writing techniques. At the same time it will expand the range and quality of your observational skills and your intuitive intelligence, thereby strengthening the resourcefulness of your inner coach.

Personal writing

Many of us associate writing with past negative experiences from school, the education system or the world of work. I remember my first public sector job and how much I hated writing committee reports and how I would worry myself sick about them. The structure and form felt alien and aloof and, most of all, I was afraid of the criticism that would often come back once the reports had been submitted.

Our anxieties may go back even further, to infant and primary school. It's no wonder many of us resist writing reflectively or creatively when blue and black ink reminds us of the dreaded school essay and red ink triggers memories of the teacher's poison pen, poised for attack on our newly formed words, fresh on the page.

How often and liberally was red ink used to denounce and demean our words and creativity in pursuit of the correct grammar and sentence structure and formation? In many cases it was not just our words and creativity that were under attack but our evolving, vulnerable self-worth, undermining our natural ability to think and be in the world in a way that made sense and meaning to us at the time.

It's a memory shared by writer PM Luidens: 'I had come to believe that writing involved the inevitable haemorrhaging red pen, bleeding over my lines with all sorts of correct teacher language.'¹

I often suggest that coaches, supervisors and coachees choose a pen colour other than blue, black or red when writing up coaching session notes or when recording and experimenting with

words in their personal notebooks and journals. I now write vertically on the page, rather than horizontally, in my own reflective notes. Writing in this way breaks with the traditional form and shape of a writing page and I often find I inherit much more room and breathing space when I write landscape.

Free writing

Reflective writing, just like any technique, needs to be practised. You'll need to develop your writing muscles so you don't turn up on the page cold and disconnected. The easiest way to warm up on the page, whether you're writing in a journal for your own self-awareness or as a part of your professional practice, is to practise free writing.

Many writers claim to have originated free writing, in various forms, but the writer

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WH Mitchell² is most commonly cited as developing the Free Fall writing method.

Free Fall writing is a method of capturing any thoughts, feelings or observations about a topic quickly in a writing practice. The idea is to write whatever comes to mind and to write as fast as you can. Free form writing can be used as a reflective tool for reviewing and evaluating the processes and interactions from our coaching and supervision sessions.

I use free writing regularly as a reflective practice when I write up my notes from my supervision and my coaching sessions. When I am given a form with prompts and headings to complete I feel constricted in my thinking and what I write. When I write free form I write much more freely, plunging deeper into the terrain of my emotions and feelings. This is a view supported by Stephanie Dowrick: 'When you write you layout a line of words... soon you can find yourself deep in new territory.'³

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Take this a step further and you can begin to see the connections and parallels between the technique of free writing and Freud's concept of free association, captured here in a quote from Gregg Levoy in his book *Callings*: 'Free association is not some harmless parlour game. It excavates material from our edges and underbellies and has its glories and its perils, such as creating images that don't correspond to the images of ourselves we present to the world, to our families and to our colleagues or even the bathroom mirror.'⁴

In my own coaching practice I've experienced remarkable revelations about myself and how I work, what the client said or did or questions or insights that might have occurred. When we get into the habit of free writing we open ourselves to a vast territory of data and information.

Getting down to practice

Begin with the breathing. Take a few minutes of mindful breathing before you start, to prepare the ground for your free writing practice as well as stimulate your reflective thoughts. Slowly take several deep breaths to ease yourself into a writing and reflective state.

Writer Laraine Herring suggests that 'observing the breath gives us an opportunity to truly embody the writing process in our cells'.⁵

Step 1: Doing the work

As soon as you can after a coaching session, take a blank sheet of paper or open a new page in your journal or notebook. Set aside 10 minutes and free write all thoughts, feelings and associations about the session as quickly as you can.

Don't try to process or work things out as you're writing. This will come later. You can go back over what you have written and make connections afterwards. But for now, just aim to get down onto the page anything that comes to you, even if it doesn't make sense.

People are often surprised when I say write for 10 minutes; they realise they don't need to put aside huge chunks of time to write reflectively. You'll be surprised by the content and quality of what can be revealed in a 10-minute free writing mindfulness practice. Once the 10 minutes is up, if you feel like continuing to write, then do so. The chances are you will.

Remember, when you're free writing there's no need to pay attention to grammar, spelling and punctuation. The objective of any kind of free writing is to be free and without limits on the page.

Step 2: Mining your free writing

In order to make sense of what you've written you'll then need to read over your writing. I've developed a couple of ways of doing this. One approach is to step away for a short period, then

re-read what I have written and make additional notes on a separate page that expand on this first rough draft.

Alternatively, I'll use a different coloured pen and make notes on the same page of the original draft. I find this particular approach very anchoring. It always feels much more grounded and helps me to see the connections that emerge in a more focused way.

Step 3: Emerging themes or topics

A particular theme may have emerged from your coaching or supervision session. Make a note of this and cross-reference the patterns and emerging themes, perhaps in a new notebook or on a new page. Then turn to a new page, write one of the themes or topics across the top of the page and free write for seven minutes all the things you think, feel or want to say about that topic or theme.

In this way you will have generated content based on a theme or topic you might discuss at the next session with your coachee, supervisee or supervisor. Or it could be a theme you take back to your own coaching or supervision, or this could be the beginning of what Anne Lamott refers to as the 'shitty first draft'⁶ of a blog post, an article for a journal like *Coaching Today* or a chapter for a forthcoming book. These are a few examples of ways in which you can extend the reach and potential of free writing to generate content and communicate your expertise and knowledge with others.

Other applications

Free writing can be applied in many other ways to your coaching and coach supervision sessions.

The demands and stresses of the work environment will mean many of your coaching clients arrive at a coaching session disconnected. They will have shut down access to a huge inner treasury that contains many answers, wisdom and insights. Including a five-minute free writing

Reflective writing: a case study

Recently I went back and re-read my reflective notes after a particularly tough coaching session. In this session I felt we were circling around the client's presenting issue. I felt stuck and so did the client. I made a decision to share what I was experiencing with the coachee and suggested we both spend 10 minutes free writing about what we thought was going on.

Through the process of taking time out to write, we were both able to reach and touch the core of the thoughts and feelings that we had not been able to put into words in our verbal communication.

To both of us, writing in this way was a breath of fresh air, an opportunity to take a step back, to look afresh and capture more succinctly and specifically what we were experiencing and possibly avoiding in that moment. The client's comment as we wrapped up was that it felt really good to take time out and write.

practice at the start of a coaching session can be a clearing process and a useful way of releasing, creating psychological and emotional space in order to be fully or more present. I'll sometimes carry a pack of brightly coloured pens that I can pull out on the spot, as well as different coloured sheets of paper or index cards. Here are some free writing prompts:

- What's on your mind right now?
- What are you looking forward to about this session?
- What are you hesitant or unsure about?
- How much of you is really here and present?
- What could you do to make yourself more fully here?
- Where would you rather be right now?
- What feelings or hunches do you have about today's conversation?





- What do you not want to talk about?
 - What do you really want to talk about today?
- Turn these into portable writing prompts. Write out each prompt individually on slips of coloured paper. Store them in an envelope or small box that is easily transportable between sessions. Add more prompts over time and build your collection of free writing prompts.

Accessing new depths

In her book *The Flourishing Principle*, journal therapist Kathleen Adams shares how 'writing down thoughts, feelings, questions, conscious dreams, confessions and inspirations has been a major contributor to the development of my emotional intelligence, problem solving abilities and healthy self concept.'

I have seen firsthand what reflective writing can reveal that is often missed or not connected with in our verbal conversations. From the moment we hold a pen or sit poised, fingers nimble and light, ready to tap dance on the keyboard, I believe we are entering a different state - one that is more mindful.

This notion of writing reflectively in order to reveal and access deeper emotions and feelings we are not always conscious of or privy to is evidenced further by reflective practitioner Gillie Bolton: 'I have known therapists or counsellors in workshops amazed or crying at reading what they have just written.'⁸

I've experienced similar reactions and responses. At a recent pilot workshop on this topic with coach supervisors, many of the

participants were surprised by what their reflective and creative writing revealed in the time that we worked together.

Cat Brogan, a poet writing in *Psychologies* magazine, suggests: 'Set your words out in a calm controlled way. Then you paint a picture that will be worth a thousand words and you are more likely to move forward and make a difference.'⁹ There's often a shedding that comes when we're alone with paper and pen.

As part of preparing this article, I contacted several coaches and invited them to describe the impact of reflective writing on their coaching and therapeutic practices. One of those practitioners (CB), who works as a psychosynthesis counsellor and is also a coach and mindfulness practitioner, referred to the

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links between writing and the practice of mindfulness:

'Mindfulness can connect the whole experience, so we may notice the tension/pressure in our hand whilst writing a particular word (or experience). What body-sensations arise or dissolve, how does your breath rhythm flow, what takes your breath away, when are you centered in your body (heart) or in your head... and how does this become evident to you? We might find a word on the tip of our pen and want to reject it but just write it down (trust the process!) and its relevance could become clear (and valuable) eventually.'

Table 1 lists some of the responses I received from CB and a male executive coach and coach supervisor (JM), highlighting their personal reflections on the process of reflective writing and ways it is of value in their coaching and supervision.

Final reflections

To thrive in the environments and contexts in which we work today requires an ongoing commitment to continuous personal and professional development, which is at its core self-driven and self-motivated.

There is significant learning to be gained by developing and embedding a practice of creative reflective writing. Julie Hays writes: 'The supervision you will receive will be far more effective when you have prepared for it via a process of self-reflection. Prior analysis saves supervision time and enables supervisors to operate at a higher level of intensity when they support and challenge you.'¹⁰

The cultivation of a writing practice that is both reflective and used for ongoing learning and development will not only grow you in your professional skills but will hold a thinking and feeling space where the people you work with can grow and, at times and in the right time, bloom, both on and off the page.

With thanks to JM and CB for their permission to use their transcripts and comments in this article.

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- 10 Hays J. *Reflective practice and supervision for coaches*. Maidenhead: Open University Press; 2007.

Table 1: Some reflections on reflective writing

JM - executive coach, coach supervisor	CB - psychosynthesis counsellor, coach and mindfulness practitioner
'It has become clear to me that, in writing down my thoughts and feelings about something that is puzzling me, I can develop a greater sense of balance, and find new insights and perspectives.'	'I like and value the immediacy that (pen and paper) notes offer.'
'It can be surprising what you find yourself writing... for me this is like finding my own "thinking environment", giving myself my own "full attention", and hence improving the quality of my thinking.'	'Clients often remark how they gain new insights and notice "patterns" through making notes.'
'I wrote myself into a positive state of mind prior to attending a workshop last summer. This was a revelation and really helped me turn up with authenticity and presence. And it is a great self-supervision tool.'	'Writing or seeing a word can transform how we perceive that word. In having a conversation exploring "blame", then writing the word, it became "be lame"... blame tends to suggest "powerlessness" but this now invited kindness and healing (rather than judgment).'