

**EXPRESSIVE FREEWRITING:  
BRINGING TOGETHER THERAPY AND CREATIVITY  
IN THE COLLEGE CLASSROOM AND BEYOND**

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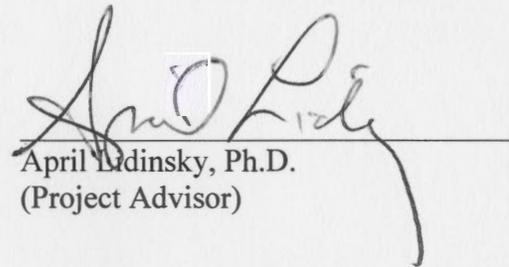
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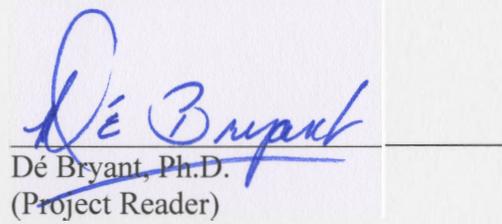
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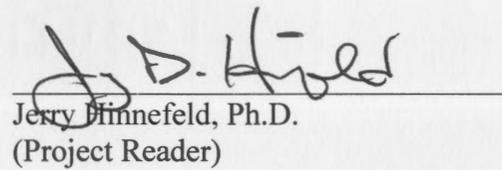
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## Dedication

*For Stephen J. Sigety and for writers everywhere*

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## **I. Introduction**

In the postmodern era, we as writers have opportunities to communicate our concerns and ideas through formats such as computers, journals, notebooks, or smartphones. Whatever the format we choose, there is strong evidence that there are positive benefits after writing for fifteen, twenty, or thirty minutes. The positive benefits are twofold: research suggests that there is a therapeutic component to expressive writing, and there is also a creative component to freewriting. I ascertained through research that there are two fields' approaches to the practice of freewriting: psychology and English. These approaches have led me to combine the two disciplines in my own classroom in a method I have coined as *expressive freewriting*.

The goal of my project is threefold. My first goal is to bring awareness of both therapeutic and creative benefits of expressive writing and freewriting to writers. I discovered through the two disciplines that freewriting is a powerful tool for writing, and I am contextualizing these two schools of thought and connecting the research in the field of composition studies. I draw on the insights of two major scholars to provide the foundation for this thesis. The first influence is Dr. James Pennebaker, a psychologist and professor who pioneered expressive writing techniques for therapeutic purposes. The second influence is Dr. Peter Elbow, an English professor who pioneered freewriting techniques for college students. I also examine the impact of Pennebaker's and Elbow's works on other professionals in the fields of psychology and English.

This leads me to my second goal; I am providing illustrated examples of my experience with students and profiles of undergraduate students in freshman level writing courses who have benefitted from the expressive freewriting prompts in my classroom. The profiles, ranging from 2010-2013, inspired my research for this thesis. The literature

from the schools of psychology and English reconfirms my belief in the power of freewriting, and that emotional pain can be connected to physical health.

My third goal is to develop a module of writing prompts with an introduction, located in the appendix of this thesis. There are twelve expressive writing prompts, adjustable for multiple audiences, using photographs as inspiration. I wrote the expressive freewriting prompts with the adult audience (18+) in mind, because this is the age of the students I have taught, using these writing prompts. However, they can be modified for younger audiences. Also, the expressive writing prompts are not restricted to college students; they can be used in groups or one-on-one with clergy, facilitators, and therapists. They are also suitable for individual writers who wish to work through trauma (ideally with a therapist's help) and writer's block.

For the purpose of the thesis, the literature review and the implementation of the writing prompts are designed primarily for instructors and professors teaching introductory level undergraduate college writing courses to students 18 years or older enrolled in two or four year community colleges, private colleges, and universities. Because Pennebaker and Elbow are college professors and worked with freshman college students in their research, and I have taught college and university students for over five years, the instructor as the audience in this project makes sense. Like Pennebaker and Elbow, I have taught college and university students. I have taught students in three different venues; a two-year community college, a private college, and a state university. In many cases, like Pennebaker and Elbow, I have used expressive and freewriting methods in the classroom, and I have personally seen emotional and intellectual growth in students in their writing and in their well-being.

## II. Literature Review

James Pennebaker; psychologist and professor, molded the expressive writing model that I use as a thread for my thesis. He developed the expressive writing model in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, and the writing model is still utilized today for therapeutic purposes (Lepore and Smyth 4). Experts in the psychology profession refer to Pennebaker's model as the "Pennebaker Writing Paradigm," and the model is simple and effective (Range and Jenkins 149). Pennebaker first experimented with undergraduate students, and after seeing positive results, expanded outside the college setting to patients with mental illnesses such as depression (Cooper 45). Pennebaker prescribes expressive writing because writing about traumatic experiences allows the student to place the experiences into a narrative. If the students can show his or her narrative, or story, that person can make more sense of the trauma, have a sense of control, and work through the emotional pain associated with the trauma (Pennebaker and Seagal 1243). Emotional pain can be connected to physical health. Pennebaker and Seagal found that students who participated in the study had fewer illnesses that required medical care (1245).

I will say more about this method below; the mental and physical aspects of expressive writing and freewriting helped my own the ways I create writing prompts for college students and others who write.

Freewriting is the second thread of my thesis. Elbow's discovery of freewriting emerges not from a scientific experiment with a control group, but from his personal experiences and struggles with academic writing. Elbow's groundbreaking book *Writing Without Teachers*, published in 1989, is a simple—yet effective—tool created for writers. Elbow himself started freewriting as a graduate student afflicted with a terrible case of

writer's block (Elbow xvi). Elbow had already dropped out of a master's program at Harvard University and was attending graduate school for the second time at Brandeis University when he discovered freewriting (xvii). So, in order to succeed in his second attempt at a master's program, Elbow forced himself to write whatever came to his mind. In this process he managed to shut down the editor in his head (xvii). Elbow states that "out of desperation I learned to sit down on the floor of my apartment with my typewriter and pour out all my feelings and thoughts into page after page—just 'blurting' onto the page awareness of writing: whining, slowly asking for help. This was my real introduction to freewriting: making nonstop, non-censored writing a deep part of me" (Elbow xvii). Elbow's epiphany as a graduate student and his research and scholarship as a professor and writer completes the second thread, and brings together the importance of writing theory and therapeutic insights.

Through this process, Elbow was able to overcome writer's block, complete his coursework, and graduate. This experience, however uncomfortable it was, led to the creation of freewriting that is used today (Elbow xvi-xvii). According to Elbow, "the only requirement is that you never stop" (1). Elbow pushed through the writing process by ignoring the noisy inner editor that was critiquing and criticizing him. There is no argumentation, editing, or evaluation in freewriting. So, Elbow managed to set aside his anxiety and quiet the inner editor and he succeeded in his academics. As a result, Elbow shared his experiences with others in the classroom, in scholarly journals, and in books. The expressive freewriting prompts I create parallel Elbow's model, so both Elbow's and Pennebaker's insights are crucial to the pedagogical practice I call "expressive writing."

Pennebaker's model is preceded by earlier theories and discoveries about the benefits of purging emotions and memories through oral expression. The therapy of purging emotions and memories of trauma through expression, based on abreaction theory, refers back to Breuer (1985), Freud (1966), and Janet (1919) (Lepore and Smyth 4). Bliss (1986) defines abreaction "as a technique (often assisted by hypnosis) for the detailed reliving of traumatic early experiences, and as such, necessary for the subject's acceptance of the validity of these experiences" (Van der hart and Brown 3). However, Breuer cautions that abreaction theory should not be used recklessly without parameters so patients will be able to handle the emotions that arise during therapy (Van der hart and Brown 3). As in oral expression, expressive writing is also conducted in a controlled environment. As I will explain later in the literature review, Pennebaker used specific time constraints in order for patients or students to overcome rumination (Cooper and Sloan 43). Rumination is when a person has repetitive negative thoughts.

Lepore and Smyth state that "the application of writing for therapeutic ends seems to have emerged from the psycho therapeutic tradition of using expressive therapies to relieve ailments associated with traumatic experiences" (3). So, Pennebaker conducted an experiment; he divided the participants into two groups. The first group was a control group, and they were in a quiet space where they could write about neutral topics. The second group was the experimental group, and they were led into a quiet space where they could write about a traumatic event or experience. The participants were advised to write for fifteen to twenty minutes for three consecutive days. The research showed that the participants who wrote about trauma felt significantly better after they participated in the study (Range and Jenkins 150). Pennebaker states that "compared to people who were

told not to write about emotional topics, those who wrote about trauma evidenced physical health” (Lepore and Smyth 4). In addition, Pennebaker found students in the experimental group who felt worse prior to writing felt better afterwards, and the students in the control group who felt better prior to writing about non- traumatic events felt worse (Pennebaker and Seagal 1246). In other words, the students in the experimental group had a cathartic experience, while the students in the control group did not.

Besides improved physical health, Pennebaker’s research shows that expressive writing is inclusive. Disclosure through expressive writing does not matter according to age, disability, gender, race, or social class. Anyone who can write can participate and benefit from the disclosure paradigm. Pennebaker and Seagal state that “disclosure is unequivocally at the core of therapy” (1243). Disclosure can be used orally or in writing, as people can refer back to oral expression through a device such as a tape recorder (Pennebaker 163). Using abreaction through the devise of a cell phone can be therapeutic for people who are unable to write well or write at all.

Like disclosure from abreaction or expressive writing, Elbow describes freewriting as cathartic in the preface of his book *Writing Without Teachers* (Elbow 7). Elbow has three messages concerning freewriting as liberation, and he utilizes a vacuum as a metaphor during the freewriting process: “Freewritings are vacuums. Gradually you will begin to carry over into your regular writing some of the voice, force, and connections that creep into the vacuum” (Elbow 7). Freewriting allows the writer to discover his or her own voice and build confidence which will allow him or her to write more freely.

Besides writing in a metaphorical vacuum, I note that Elbow focused on freewriting “without teachers.” This is based on Elbow’s past unpleasant experiences writing for teachers, particularly after a harrowing experience with a professor. Elbow states that “the main thing about freewriting is that it is nonediting” (Elbow 7). From Elbow’s experiences and my experiences as a student and an instructor, the fear of evaluation (especially if the evaluation is harsh) and the focus on grades is on the forefront. The fear of evaluation can and does hinder students in writing classes. Elbow is referring to the “teacher” as a metaphor for evaluation.

Finally, Elbow proposes taking away the concept of forming an argument when freewriting. Instead, freewriting is the opposite. Instead of having a specific argument for or against a topic in a persuasive paper, or perfecting a thesis, Elbow asserts that freewriting should not have a specific purpose except to simply write. He also points out that freewriting does not have immediate effects, but it will help writers when they have future projects (Elbow xvii-xxi). Freewriting is helpful for me as a scholar and as a college instructor, and I see improvements in my academic and creative writing, as well as in the students’ writing. Being able to purge one’s thoughts on paper is the first step to writing. If we as scholars, instructors, and students can learn to enjoy the process of freewriting, we can start writing more easily, and eventually learn to manage fear of evaluations, and write effective arguments and theses in academic and evaluated works.

Elbow has a discovery about the concept of the writer’s voice while reading poetry and short stories. He credits the 20<sup>th</sup> century poet Robert Frost with connecting voice and style through his poems. As Elbow was reading the poetry, he could imagine

the voice of the Robert Frost in his head. Then, Elbow realized the importance of voice in relation to writing (119).

Like Elbow, Pennebaker has counselors, teachers, therapists, and writers who follow Pennebaker's and Elbow's methodologies on expressive writing and freewriting for themselves, for their students, and in some cases, for their patients. As an example, Stephen Lepore and Joshua M. Smyth, professors and psychologists, follow in Pennebaker's writerly footsteps. Lepore, like Pennebaker, studies stress management and coping mechanisms including expressive writing as a tool for patients to handle stress. Smyth, like Pennebaker, specializes in stress, particularly the effects of stress. Smyth specifically uses expressive writing as a tool to allay stress symptoms (Lepore and Smyth 313). Both researchers collaborated with other professionals and edited a book titled *The Writing Cure: How Expressive Writing Promotes Health and Emotional Well-Being*. As a nod to his successors, Pennebaker wrote an epilogue in Lepore and Smith's book. Both the book and the contributors serve as a valuable source for my work here on theorizing and developing the value of freewriting in the composition classroom (Lepore and Smyth vii-ix).

In the opening chapter of *The Writing Cure*, Lepore and Smyth list three reasons why expressive writing has gained awareness in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. First, Lepore and Smith assert that Pennebaker's expressive writing can be beneficial for people suffering from traumas.

There is a plethora of research that proves that Pennebaker's writing model can help people cope with traumatic events and supports what I witness firsthand while teaching composition classes. Some of the benefits of expressive writing mentioned in

*The Writing Cure* include lowering blood pressure, regulating emotions (in return can help with physical health), and providing closure for those who are suffering from a terminal illness. There is also a section in *The Writing Cure* for applications of expressive writing including “interapy,” which is a therapeutic writing model specifically for the Internet (Lepore and Smyth vii-viii).

Second, expressive writing is cost-effective. Expressive writing is less expensive than visiting a psychiatrist, psychologist, and/or therapist for more intensive counseling. Expressive writing is also less expensive than taking medication. Add in the hassle of obtaining the medications, as medications, particularly ADHD stimulants such as Adderall, Concerta, and Ritalin are not always in stock at the pharmacy. And there are the possible side effects and interactions of medications. I am not suggesting that expressive writing should replace medication, but that expressive writing is another effective tool to combat mental and even physical stress, as I will explain below.

Third, as mentioned previously, expressive writing due to access and low cost is inclusive and crosses socioeconomic lines. In a sense, expressive writing is an equalizer. Participants have easier access to another method of relieving stress. Participants do not have to contend with bus fare, or filling up the gas tank to drive to a destination for therapy, as a laptop or notebook is easier to access (Lepore and Smyth 6-7). Almost anyone, from the impoverished to the affluent, can benefit from expressive writing.

Besides Pennebaker, Lepore, and Smyth, many other academics have researched and theorized about the multivalent value of expressive writing. For example, the article “Effects of Writing about Stressful Experiences in Patients with Asthma or Rheumatoid Arthritis,” published by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* in April 1999,

has been cited in several other academic journals (Harris 188). The experiment followed Pennebaker's model, as there were two groups, all afflicted with asthma or arthritis, involved with the experiment: the first group wrote about non-stressful events, and the second group wrote about a stressful event in their lives. The participants wrote for twenty minutes on three consecutive days. The physicians then examined all the participants, and discovered that the participants who wrote about their trauma showed fewer symptoms. The group that wrote about non-traumatic topics did not show any significant change (Harris 188). The late twentieth century discovery that expressive writing can alleviate physical symptoms sets a useful precedent for twenty-first century research. The fact that there is evidence of physical and mental health benefits after writing is another valid reason to justify expressive freewriting in college classrooms.

In another article, physicians Craft, Davis, and Paulson show the benefits of expressive writing with early breast cancer survivors. Based on their study with 60 patients who participated in expressive writing, Craft, Davis, and Paulson stated that "the results have included a decrease in physical symptoms, a decrease in medical care use, and an increase in perceived support" (306). This supports my findings that I have seen students experience fewer physical symptoms (and evidence of stress) after participating in expressive freewriting.

Dana Dunn, a professor from Moravin College, references both Pennebaker and Elbow in her article "Lessons Learned from an Interdisciplinary Writing Course: Implications for Student Writing in Psychology." Freewriting is one of the writing and assessment techniques that she uses in her psychology courses (Dunn 223). Dunn states that "A major benefit of freewriting is that students quickly generate pages of material

which can be written or reintegrated into developing papers” (224). She also asserts that freewriting is part of the assessment techniques but is not evaluated or graded (Dunn 224).

And like Pennebaker, Elbow has successors. Not only are his successors professors in college classrooms, but they are also professional essayists and writers. These professors and writers have incorporated Elbow-inspired freewriting techniques into their writing processes. The influential authors I refer to are Natalie Goldberg and Anne Lamott; both are prolific writers and instructors. Goldberg incorporates freewriting techniques into both her teaching and writing, as she presents writing workshops from formal venues like universities and technical schools to more informal settings such as writing groups (Goldberg 3). In her renowned book *Writing Down the Bones*, Goldberg develops freewriting techniques to inspire writers. In freewriting, Goldberg states that writers should “stay present with whatever comes up, and keep your hand moving” (13). Goldberg echoes what Elbow advises in freewriting: Don’t stop. Keep writing. Like Elbow, Goldberg’s writing is timed, and like Elbow, she states to her writers: “don’t cross out,” “don’t worry about spelling, punctuation, grammar,” “don’t think,” “don’t get logical” (8). Goldberg also adds her humorous and unique twist to freewriting: “lose control,” and “go for the jugular. If something comes up in your writing that is scary or naked, dive right into it. It probably has lots of energy” (8). Through Elbow’s concept of freewriting, Goldberg is able to develop and implement her process in order to inspire others to break through the wall of writer’s block and unleash their creativity. Similarly, Lamott encourages her writers by bridging the gap between Elbow’s freewriting and Pennebaker’s model of expressive writing. In her book *Bird by Bird*, Lamott states that

“writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation” (237). Lamott also suggests that writing can relieve the symptoms of isolation, which is a symptom of depression (237).

Through Goldberg and Lamott, and other authors mentioned previously, particularly Lepore and Smyth, I see commonality with Pennebaker’s expressive writing and Elbow’s freewriting models. First, both the expressive writing and the freewriting exercises and styles were developed by professors in college classrooms in the 1980s and 1990s. Second, expressive writing and freewriting are models still used in the present, with additional devices such as computers, iPads, smartphones, and tablets available. Third, both writing styles cost about the same as I have noted they cost less than prescription medication and additional psychotherapy appointments, which are not always covered by insurance plans. Fourth, expressive writing and freewriting can be delivered in almost any venue as long as there is the guarantee of privacy and emotional safety for writers. Finally, both expressive writing and freewriting models are characterized by typing or writing in a controlled setting for a specific amount of time. My research in the two different fields’ approaches to the practices of freewriting has led me to combine expressive writing and freewriting in my own classroom in a method I have coined *expressive freewriting*.

In this next section, I will contextualize my argument about the academic virtues of expressive freewriting into current research on composition and theory. It is one aspect to compare and discuss expressive writing and freewriting; it is entirely another to add one or the combination of both (expressive freewriting) into college classrooms. Adding expressive freewriting may pose a challenge for both professors and students. Although meeting times vary in classrooms (some meet for a short as 50 minutes or as long as four

hours), there is a constraint on time in the college classroom. So, the challenges are to justify expressive writing in the college classroom to department chairs, deans, and administrators, and then to find the time to fit expressive freewriting into both the class time and the curriculum.

For the student, economics is on the forefront. Students are faced with the stresses of finances to attend college, dealing with accruing student loan debt, and feeling the pressure to find a job right after graduation. Many students, at least the students I have taught in both private colleges and public universities, are working a full-time job and sometimes an additional job. I have taught bleary-eyed students who attend morning classes after working an overnight shift. In many cases, students are trying to push through as quickly as possible, and therefore are focused on the end goals: graduation and job security. As a result of the external economic challenges combined with the focus on the end goal, students may not feel that they have the time or the energy to engage in a creative activity such as expressive freewriting.

Sandie Friedman, an Assistant Professor of Writing and Deputy Director of First-Year Writing at George Washington University, also asserts that students focus primarily on the economics of attending college (77). In her 2013 article, "This Way for Vampires: Teaching First-Year Composition in "Challenging Times," Friedman states that "the climate of economic anxiety has pushed both students and teachers to become even more career-oriented" (83). If the pressure on both professors and students is on employment and financial stability, it may be difficult to justify creative processes such as expressive freewriting in the classroom. Because students can (and do) have a strong focus on grades, and because every assignment or project has a finite assessment attached, it may

be a hard sell in the classroom. Expressive writing may be a hard sell for administrators, students, and admittedly, some writing instructors. Administrators may find it difficult to measure outcomes of expressive freewriting as related to the objectives, and therefore may be hesitant to support it. Students may have difficulty buying in to an assignment that is not evaluated (except for a completion grade or participation) and may feel that expressive writing is a waste of time. Instructors may not believe that expressive freewriting is worthwhile because they would have to justify and measure the outcomes to the administrators.

However, I would argue the anxiety and stress generated in college classrooms due to the economic cultural climate and external administrative stresses are valid reasons why incorporating expressive freewriting is not only appropriate, but necessary. Friedman supports this claim, as the practice in her classroom uses the playful and creative metaphors of punk rockers and vampires. Friedman emphasizes the need for students to role play and to embrace their inner punk-rocker in their writing: "Against the pressure to be 'accountable,' we might teach in the spirit of punk rock: intellectual play just might get you outside the 'social mobility' paradigm. In fact, vampires might get you out of this paradigm, if vampires help you do social critique" (83). Basically, Friedman wants to meet students on their level, where they are creatively. The paradigm that Friedman refers to and intends to break out of through creativity, punk rockers, and vampires alike, is the trance and tunnel vision of focusing on grades on every single assignment, participation activity, research paper, quiz, or test in order to pass the class and earn a college degree to find a job.

Besides the fact that expressive freewriting is a creative, inexpensive, and therapeutic asset to the classroom, instructors as well as students need to take the focus away from just the end goal (evaluation) and allow students to enjoy the writing process. Megan Fulwiler, professor of English at the College of Saint Rose, states that “If our goal is to develop lifelong writers, then one of our most important priorities needs to be ensuring that our students want to write and see “the value in caring about it” (5). If students can have positive experiences with the process of expressive freewriting and writing for the sake of writing (not necessarily to earn the highest grade), students may begin to see writing as a useful tool that they can carry with them for their personal and professional lives.

In addition, expressive freewriting may build confidence in writers in the classroom, because students are at different levels of writing, particularly in the community college. According to Holly Hassel and Joanne Baird Giordano, “writing instructors at two-year institutions face a class of students with an extremely varied pathway to a transfer-level composition course” (121). Betsy Lucal, sociology professor at Indiana University South Bend, echoes this statement. In her lecture posted on YouTube, “Neoliberalism & Higher Education: How a Misguided Philosophy Undermines Teaching,” Lucal states that “In 2012, 40% of college students are students in community colleges.” Community college students may need expressive writing even more because of their academic experiences, or inexperience. Hassel and Giordano note in their study of 1400 students participating in a survey to study first-year composition, students struggled with written English, critical and analytical thinking, and lack of academic conventions (128-130). Expressive freewriting can help students who are

struggling with anxiety and stress due to the deficiencies with conventions, critical thinking, and writing. Writing, like art or music, requires practice, and practice that is not under the constant scrutiny of evaluation.

As a college instructor, I see the paradigm with evaluation first-hand. However, I do not blame students for this paradigm. At this writing, we survived the Great Recession that started in 2008, and are creeping upward into economic recovery. Students are understandably wary of out-of-the-box thinking and creativity because they are thinking of the end goal—graduation and then finding a job so they can pay their student loans. Many students are weary of the pressures of debt outside the classroom and the pressures of academic excellence inside the classroom, and it may be taking a toll on their emotional well-being. According to Tamar Lewin's *New York Times* article entitled "Record Level of Stress Found in College Freshman," based on a 2010 national survey of over 200,000 full-time college freshmen, mental well-being among college freshmen dropped to the lowest in twenty-five years (1). According to the survey, only 52 percent of college freshman answered that their emotional well-being was above average (Lewin 1). We as educators need to shift the student's paradigm (as well as our own) from evaluation to the writing process.

Bringing creativity into the classroom through expressive freewriting and setting the fear aside, even temporarily, may improve cognitive health and emotional health, while practicing writing fluency. Otherwise, prolonged wariness and weariness, anxiety and fear, may be harmful to the student's physical health. Experts note that the limbic system is directly affected by stress. According to Sapolsky, "Glucocorticoids (GCs) are the adrenal steroid hormones secreted in response to stress...if the exposure to GCs is

prolonged, there are a variety of pathological outcomes that become more likely, including insulin-resistant diabetes, hypertension, immunosuppression, and reproductive impairments” (1736). Allaying and replacing external fear with internal calm and creativity in writing through the inner punk rocker, vampires, or other metaphors has potential to help lessen stress to the limbic system, heal and inspire college students to feel better and write better. Expressive freewriting can help.

Although there are varying perspectives on the value of expressive freewriting, Harris supports expressive freewriting in her article “Re-Writing the Subject: Psychoanalytic Approaches to Creative Writing and Composition Pedagogy.” In her 2001 article, Harris addresses the tensions between composition and creative writing courses (175). Harris states that “There is more tension between the two groups than there is camaraderie and even more tension between creative writing faculty and literary critics” (175). She states that “specialization, like any application, comes *after* the fact of writing” (177). Harris is in the expressivist camp, like Elbow, and argues that creative writing has a place in composition (Harris 177). I concur with Harris that there is room for creativity in composition classes, as expression and freewriting can produce great ideas, which in turn can become good (or at least better) papers.

Another cross-curricular approach to expressive freewriting is in the form of contemplation. Robert Haight, a creative writing and meditation professor at Kalamazoo Valley Community College, takes a holistic approach to creative writing (29). In his 2010 article “The Classroom is a *Sangha*: Contemplative Education in the Community College,” Haight instills meditative techniques and mindfulness with creative expression and freewriting in the college classroom (30). A primary reason why Haight uses

meditative techniques is to allay fear for both the instructor and the student (30).

Allaying and managing anxiety and fear continues to be a theme in scholars who analyze the challenges of teaching at the university level. Haight states in his article "...that a contemplative approach to education has the potential to lessen student anxiety, increase student happiness, and prepare students to build a personal foundation" (31).

Contemplation and meditation are healing practices along with freewriting. Haight references Elbow in his freewriting portion of his article. Haight states that "the classroom atmosphere that is created when a number of students and their instructor write in silence for ten minutes is positive and defining" (35). Haight's research and practices are examples of how expressive freewriting can be integrated successfully into the classroom, not just to make students better writers, but also to add a therapeutic component. The therapeutic component can be created because Haight removes the element of evaluation and does not grade his students' freewriting (35). Instruction can be viewed through the lens of the "literary landscape" (Gallegos 1). Erin Penner Gallegos states that "the literary landscape is so named because it requires the adoption of a spatial and material perspective into teaching composition" (1). Gallegos mentions that classrooms need to be a place of comfort and inspiration for students as they bring in their perspectives from the outside world, and that their experiences matter (3). Gallegos also echoes the current composition trends of students going to college for economic stability (5). Gallegos also brings forth the concept of ecocomposition, and states that "ecocomposition challenges understanding of the purpose and place of writing in academia" (7). Her viewpoint comes down to redefining place, which needs to be stress-reducing and conducive for students to write well (Gallegos 7). Place, like

contemplation, can positively affect students in their abilities to relax, concentrate, and produce better writing. Pennebaker's expressive writing may help with emotional and physical struggles of the writer (wellness) and Elbow's freewriting may help creativity and combat writer's block (voice).

The third component, place, which has been previously introduced in the thesis, can help students with wellness and voice. Creating an emotional safe place for students to write can pose challenges for instructors, but there are ways to enhance the writing experience. The writing place can be positive for students even in a crowded classroom with uncomfortable wooden desks. Small adjustments such as putting an attractive plant in the classroom or playing soft music in the background can help center students in a stressful world so they can concentrate on writing.

In the preceding paragraphs I have discussed Pennebaker and Elbow's models of expressive writing and freewriting. I have discussed Pennebaker and Elbow's successors: in particular, Lepore and Smith, and Goldberg and Lamott. I also contextualized the argument of expressive freewriting into research on composition and theory; I provided examples of how expressive freewriting can be used in the college classroom. In the next part of the thesis, I will move to the student profiles, which demonstrate the effectiveness of expressive freewriting in response to my original writing prompts, which are included in the appendix of this thesis.

### **III. Expressive Freewriting Profiles and Analysis**

The reason I chose to research the powers of freewriting is because I have seen firsthand of how freewriting has helped students at the private community college where I work. I have taught at Brown Mackie College (BMC) from 2010 to the present (2015). Here are several profiles of students that I have experienced while teaching composition courses. These profiles demonstrate that expressive freewriting helps students handle emotionally charged experiences, based on their disclosure. The names have been changed for privacy reasons. These profiles help illustrate and personalize the concepts in my literature review.

#### **Dean's Profile**

Dean is a young, mid-twenty-something man who served as a Marine in the Iraq war. (Many soldiers returned back to school during this time.) Although he has a jovial sense of humor, there is sadness behind his young eyes. As he took Composition I with me, I assigned a series of twenty freewrites, plus other writing games to inspire ideas for future essays and to increase writing fluency. He felt safe to write, as what was written between Dean and I was confidential. He started the freewriting exercises (with simple prompts—music, a photograph, etc.) cautiously and hesitantly, which is to be expected. Soon the material that he wrote in his freewrites transferred over into his memoir assignment. I remember that he asked permission to use a swear word in dialogue, as saying “shucks” did not make sense when he was being attacked in Iraq. I gave him the academic freedom to write the swear words, because they added authenticity to his war experiences. In later freewrites, he wrote that the horrific experiences he wrote in his

freewrites he had not shared and could not share with his young wife. I sensed a feeling of catharsis from him when he finished my class on the twelfth day.

Referring back to the literature review, Lepore and Smyth, like Pennebaker, includes expressive writing as a tool for patients and writers to manage stress symptoms. Lepore's background stems from the concept of emotion regulation theory, which is based on the premise that dysregulated emotions results in poorer health than those who have regulated emotions (Lepore and Smyth 9). Lepore and Smyth both use expressive writing as a tool to help patients and writers regulate their emotions (9). In class, Dean was able to use expressive freewriting to dysregulate his emotions, as he had the memories from the war bottled up inside. As a result of expressive freewriting, Dean was able to release those emotions and alleviate his anxiety.

### **Amber's Profile**

In 2011, the Indiana State Fair Stage collapsed in Indianapolis when the band Sugarland was supposed to take the stage. At least seven people died after the stage collapsed. Amber, my student, in her early twenties, was at the concert during the collapse, and witnessed the stage collapsing. She saw several victims die or sustain severe injuries. As a result of witnessing the trauma, Amber was suffering from PTSD while taking my class. The freewriting prompts (and there is always a wild card option to write about anything) helped Amber cope with the trauma associated with the incident. Despite her trauma, freewriting helped Amber stay and succeed in the course.

Amber's recovery is consistent with Lepore and Smyth's statement, that "the application of writing for therapeutic ends seems to have emerged from the psycho

therapeutic tradition of using expressive therapies to relieve ailments associated with traumatic experiences” (3). Through the freewriting prompts, Amber was able to regulate her emotions and cope better with the trauma. She was able to write more freely, and her mood lifted in the twelve days we spent together in class. Amber also disclosed that the freewriting prompts in the class helped her deal with the trauma. This is another example of how expressive freewriting brings together the schools of composition theory and psychology.

### **Jake’s Profile**

Jake, a man in his early twenties, took an evening composition course with me. He had a lot of external pressure, as Jake worked full-time at a car dealership, attended school for four hours three times a week, and had a wife and newborn baby at home. After participating in several of the freewriting exercises, Jake told me that freewriting saved his job. He was having a particularly rough day with a particularly rude customer. Jake kept his composure, and when he was finished with the customer, he went back to his locker, pulled out a notebook, and wrote for several minutes. As a result, Jake was able to release his anger in a healthy manner.

Jake’s story is an example of taking the concept of place and applying it to a real-life setting. Gallegos mentions that classrooms need to be a place of comfort and inspiration for students as they bring in their perspectives from the outside world, and that their experiences matter (3). Jake was able to use expressive freewriting as a coping mechanism to regulate his emotions from the classroom and place them in a real-life scenario. Because he was able to regulate his emotions, Jake was not only able to keep

his job, but he was also able to stay in college, which is beneficial for both Jake and the college.

### **Julie's Profile**

Julie, a mother and grandmother in her late forties, used humor in her writing to vent about issues that bothered her. She took a class in the winter with me, and one of the writing prompts was about snow. She wrote a hilarious rant about slow winter drivers. She read her freewrite aloud in classes as students are welcome but not required to do, and we all shared a good laugh. Through expressive freewriting, Julie was able to vent her morning frustration in a healthy and humorous way.

Julie's profile is another example of how expressive freewriting is used to regulate emotions. "Hostility and impulsiveness also contribute to interpersonal problems" (Lepore and Smyth 101). Instead of keeping her frustrations bottled up, Julie expressed them in a safe and healthy manner, kept positive interpersonal relationships with classmates, and improved her writing skills.

### **Rachael's Profile**

Rachael was in her mid-twenties, and a mother of young children. When she took my composition class, Rachael's younger sister had been recently murdered. Rachael was grappling with grief and supporting her deceased sister's children. As the semester progressed, Rachael disclosed more details of her sister's murder, and expressed her grief more freely. Although Rachael continued to grieve, she started to heal. She was able to finish the composition course.

Smyth states that “there is mounting evidence that people who have experienced stressful life events reap physical and psychological health benefits when they engage in expressive writing” (Lepore and Smyth 99). As a result of expressive freewriting, Rachael had a safe way to purge her emotions, stay in class, and stay in school. She was able to psychologically and physically manage the occupational therapy program and graduated with an associate’s degree.

I have witnessed first-hand how student writers who expressed real-life trauma healed through expressive freewriting. The research I have conducted in this thesis supports that healing can take place through writing. Students who are physically and mentally healthier may write better, and research has shown that people (students or not) can heal through expressive freewriting. As our society continues to deal with stressors, expressive freewriting is an easy way to manage stress. Calmer students can write better, as calmer people tend to think more clearly and tend to make better decisions, such as what Jake did during a stressful day at work.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

There is a significant and multi-disciplinary history of using freewriting and expressive writing as methods of helping students overcome classroom-related stress and personal mental health challenges. As I have examined in this thesis, my proposal to combine together the practice of expressive writing and freewriting is significant and timely, given the demands of current composition programs and undergraduate students. Although Pennebaker and Elbow discovered and perfected their elements of expressive writing and freewriting in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, I note that this form of writing is currently and desperately needed in busy, career-oriented, goal-driven courses in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Counselors and professors such as Lepore and Smith, Range and Jenkins, and Harris are still using writing techniques for patients and students (and many times, both) for therapeutic and creative purposes. Writing can be both cathartic and pleasurable. Students who can learn to enjoy the writing process without fear or trepidation may become better writers. Therefore, the writers may become better students, better employees, and better contributing members of society. The student profiles stated in the thesis are examples of success: Dean was able to work through his PTSD, finish his courses, and earn his degree as an Occupational Therapy Assistant. Amber was able to work through her PTSD and finish the Fundamentals of English course. Jake was able to balance his family, school, and work life, finish the course, and earn his degree in IT. Julie sailed through the course and graduated with a degree in Medical Assisting. Finally, as stated previously, Rachael was able to work through her grief, pass her courses, and earn her degree as an Occupation Therapy Assistant.

The Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC), the major professional composition organization, asserts that "...the nature of writing as a complex and content-rich interaction between people" (CCCC). The interaction and connections through words and writing may help students become better citizens, better employees, better graduates, and better writers. The student profiles are five examples of how expressive freewriting can foster positive connections with others, even if it just a writing assignment shared between the student and the teacher.

Significantly, the beneficial effects of what I call expressive freewriting with students are also being explored and published in non-academic publications. As an example, there was an article published on npr.org entitled "The Writing Assignment that Changes Lives" (Kamenetz). In this article, Jordan Peterson, a psychology professor at the University of Toronto, created a college course called "Maps of Meaning." In his course, Peterson's students participate in writing exercises and combine the exercises with goals in order to face challenges (Kamenetz). Peterson's model is closely related to expressive freewriting because the writing exercises allow students to provide their own narratives and improve their lives. One of Peterson's students, Christine Brophy, benefitted from The Maps of Meaning program. She was a former drug addict and unhealthy, but through writing, she overcame her issues, stayed in school, and is now earning her doctoral degree (Kamentz).

I am planning on taking my thesis out into the community to recreate a writerly renaissance; I wish to implement expressive freewriting prompts in college classrooms, women's shelters, and hospice centers. I want to have the prompts published as modules for facilitators, mental health professionals, educators, clergy, writers, and the like. I

intend for my thesis and the prompts to be like rocks that are thrown into a lake, seeing how many times the rocks can skip ahead, and to watch the ripples from the multiple impact of the rocks hitting the water expand. I am looking forward to seeing where the next part of this academic journey leads. I plan on submitting proposals for conferences and grants to share my findings with others. I am also interested in learning more in-depth about how undergraduate students progress by using expressive freewriting prompts. I will contact the IRB and work with them to measure and monitor student successes. On a final note, I believe administrators and faculty and students need an environment where we can press pause and take a moment to reflect, particularly in composition and creative writing classes. Learning how to write, and learning how to truly write *well*, does not happen as quickly as a push of a button or a series of keystrokes. I have had many composition and literature students tell me that they despise writing, not only because of the fear of evaluation, but of the time pressure to write. They have commitments to family and jobs on top of school.

I keep hearing from students that they need more time to write, and not under duress. And by time, I mean more interaction with instructors and professors, and more time writing in the classroom. Increasing students in writing courses is counterproductive, and will not be cost-effective in the long run if many of them fail due to lack of time and interaction. According to Megan Fulwiler, English professor and yoga instructor, "Writing, like yoga, is a continuing practice—not a definitive skill to be mastered once and for all. We can dedicate our classrooms to practice using activities like freewriting, drafting, and peer workshops" (4). Writing should be an enjoyable process and a process where students can practice writing more effectively with minimal stress.

This is where composition meets psychology in my thesis, and in the expressive freewriting techniques that I have developed. Freshman anxiety, stress, and struggle are hardly new concepts, and similar issues with college freshman still exist today. Students continue to shut down from external and internal pressures, and the schools they attend are pressure to retain them. Pennebaker and Elbow separately addressed these issues at approximately the same time, but from two separate schools of thought. Both Pennebaker's and Elbow's concepts started with the self, and then passed along their insights to students, patients, and writers. Writing for therapy and creativity is coming back en vogue, and we need to collectively pause now more than ever, just for a moment—or for twenty minutes—expressively freewriting in the college classroom, in nature, in the therapist's office, or any other safe and inspirational place to write.

## **V. Appendix: Introduction to the Writing Prompts**

The following expressive writing prompts are created from the multi-disciplinary research discussed in the literature review. They are also based on the concepts of wellness, voice, and place. The expressive writing prompts can be multi-sensory. As an example, sounds of ocean waves can be played while a photograph of a lake or ocean is shown on a screen. If logistically possible, instructors can take students outside the classroom and write in a different space, such as under a tree or on a picnic bench. Also, the writing prompts are not limited to the classroom paradigm. Although I have been focusing in on college instructors and students as models and point-of-references, the expressive freewriting prompts can be used at home, in hospitals for patients (and families of patients), in retreats, in shelters, and in writer's groups. The list is not exhaustive.

I have designed twelve prompts so participants can write for 15-20 minutes three times a week for four weeks. The prompts are listed in alphabetical order, but can be used in any order, and can be adapted with photography or other visuals, in case an indoor projector or an outdoor location is not optional. I have also included summer-themed writing prompts because the winter weather is cold and gray in northern Indiana, and participants may be prone to Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). I have used all or a variation of the prompts in the classroom for college students or in a library program setting for writers. Although some students showed apprehension for the expressive freewriting activities, most students enjoyed and benefitted from the experiences.

Please note that the prompts are written in second person in order to foster a less formal approach with participants.

- Writing Prompt #1: Astronomy
- Writing Prompt #2: Butterfly
- Writing Prompt #3: Cat and Rabbit
- Writing Prompt #4: Clouds
- Writing Prompt #5: Favorite Pet
- Writing Prompt #6: Flowers
- Writing Prompt #7: Gift From the Sea
- Writing Prompt #8: The Oreo Cookie Experiment
- Writing Prompt #9: Music
- Writing Prompt #10: Seagull on the Beach
- Writing Prompt #11: Sheep from Hawes
- Writing Prompt #12: Sunset

### Writing Prompt #1: Astronomy

When in need of inspiration, reach for the stars! NASA hosts a website called Astronomy Picture of the Day (APOD). Each day of the year the website hosts a professional photograph or an artist rendering of an aspect of the universe. Above the picture is the date, and below an astronomer writes a paragraph (with links) about the picture.

“The Pleiades Deep and Dusty” by David Lane



(Source: <http://apod.nasa.gov>)

When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write “I don’t know what to write.”

**Writing Prompt #2: Butterfly**

This photograph was taken in the butterfly exhibit at the Potawatomi Zoo in South Bend, Indiana. Have you ever visited a butterfly garden?

“Butterfly in Garden” by Lori Caskey-Sigety



When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write “I don’t know what to write.”

### **Writing Prompt #3: Cat and Rabbit**

This writing prompt is a photograph of Moshi the cat looking through a window at a wild rabbit nonchalantly soaking up the sunshine. Can you imagine what Moshi is thinking? What do you think the rabbit is thinking?

“Cat and Rabbit” by Lori Caskey-Sigety



When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write “I don’t know what to write.”

**Writing Prompt #4: Clouds**

“If you are ever feeling down, look up.” –Author unknown.

Clouds can provide comfort, creativity, and a sense of wonder.

“Scotland Clouds” by Lori Caskey-Sigety



When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write “I don’t know what to write.”

### Writing Prompt #5: Favorite Pet

Do you have a favorite pet from childhood? Do you have a favored pet now? (You may also think of a family member's pet, or a pet from a movie or television show.) What made this particular pet special to you? Option: use a photograph of your own beloved pet for inspiration.

"Brutus" by Lori Caskey-Sigety



When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write "I don't know what to write."

**Writing Prompt #6: Flowers**

This is a photograph taken in early afternoon in the spring. Do you have a favorite type of flower?

“Tulips Near the St. Joseph River” by Lori Caskey-Sigety

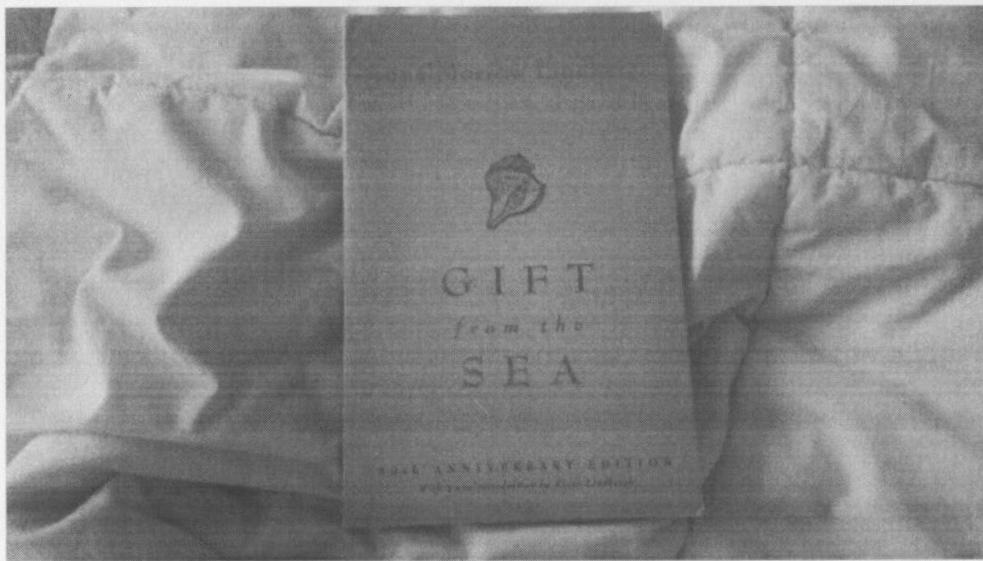


When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write “I don’t know what to write.”

### Writing Prompt #7: Gift from the Sea

Read an excerpt from Anne Morrow Lindbergh's *Gift from the Sea*:

"My shell is not like this, I think. How untidy it has become! Blurred with moss, knobby with barnacles, its shape is hardly recognizable any more. Surely, it had a shape once. It has a shape still in my mind. What is the shape of my life?" (Lindbergh 16).



When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write "I don't know what to write."

### Writing Prompt #8: The Oreo Cookie Experiment

When you see Oreo cookies, what thoughts come to mind? Did you dunk your Oreos in milk? Did you twist them? You can take this prompt a step further and try the Oreo Cookie Experiment! First, plug your nose and take a bite. What textures can you smell or taste? Finish the cookie. Then, take another cookie and without plugging your nose, take a bite. What can you smell or taste? Describe the differences and similarities. Milk is optional (Brittenham 2012).



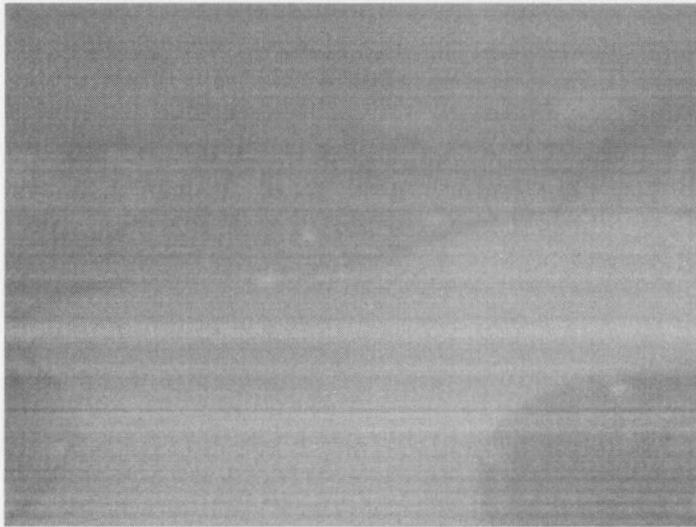
When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write “I don’t know what to write.”

**Writing Prompt #9: Music**

Listening to soft music without lyrics can inspire you to write in a calming environment.

Play soft music while looking at this photograph. What words come to your mind?

“Fog over Pool in San Diego” by Lori Caskey-Sigety



When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write “I don’t know what to write.”

**Writing Prompt #10: Seagull on the Beach**

Notice the seagull is calmly sitting in the sand, oblivious to the crashing waves that are approaching. What do you think the seagull is thinking?

“Riding the Storm” by Lori Caskey-Sigety



When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write “I don’t know what to write.”

**Writing Prompt #11: Sheep from Hawes**

Nice to see ewe! What do you think this English sheep may be thinking?

“Sheep from Hawes” by Lori Caskey-Sigety



When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write “I don’t know what to write.”

**Writing Prompt #12: Sunset**

Have you ever viewed a sunset? If so, where is your favorite place to watch a sunset?

“Michigan Sunset” by Lori Caskey-Sigety



When you look at this photograph, what do you see? What ideas, memories, and thoughts come to your mind? Write consistently for twenty minutes. Please keep writing for the duration, even if you have to write “I don’t know what to write.”

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M.L.S., Library and Information Science, Indiana University-Purdue University,  
Indianapolis, 2005

B.A., Communication Studies, Manchester College, 1994

A.A., General Studies, Holy Cross College, 1994

**Positions Held**

Associate Faculty in Information Literacy, Franklin D. Schurz Library, Indiana  
University South Bend, South Bend, Indiana, 2014-2015

Associate Faculty in Communications, Ernestine M. Raclin School of the Arts, Indiana  
University South Bend, South Bend, Indiana, 2013-Present

Adjunct Faculty in English, Ivy Tech Community College, South Bend, Indiana, 2012-  
2013

Adjunct Faculty in General Studies, Brown Mackie College, South Bend, Indiana, 2010-  
Present

Manager, LaSalle Branch, St. Joseph County Public Library, South Bend, Indiana, 2005-  
2010

Customer Service Specialist, North Liberty Branch, St. Joseph County Public Library,  
North Liberty, Indiana, 2003-2005

Young People's Specialist, Centre Township Branch Library, St. Joseph County Public  
Library, South Bend, Indiana, 1999-2003

Assistant to the Head Librarian, Virginia M. Tutt Branch, St. Joseph County Public  
Library, South Bend, Indiana, 1997-1999

Children's Librarian, Virginia M. Tutt Branch, St. Joseph County Public Library, South  
Bend, Indiana, 1995-1997

**Honors and Awards**

Nominee, YWCA, Women in Achievement for Arts and Literature, South Bend, Indiana, 2007

Selected to Present a Senior Series Convocation, Manchester College, North Manchester, Indiana, 1994

Pi Kappa Delta, Manchester College, North Manchester, Indiana, 1993

**Professional Memberships and Service**

Member, LaSalle Square Steering Committee, 2008-2010

REFORMA, 2008-2009

Secretary, Lincoln Way West Gateway Association, 2006-2010

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