

# Writing builds resilience by changing your brain, helping you face everyday challenges

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Writing is a way of thinking and doing.

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Ordinary and universal, the act of writing changes the brain. From dashing off a heated text message to composing an op-ed, writing allows you to, at once, name your pain and create distance from it. Writing can shift your mental state from overwhelm and despair to grounded clarity — a shift that reflects resilience.

Psychology, the media and the wellness industry shape public perceptions of resilience: Social scientists study it, journalists celebrate it, and wellness brands sell it.

They all tell a similar story: Resilience is an individual quality that people can strengthen with effort. The American Psychological Association defines resilience as an ongoing process of personal growth through life's challenges. News headlines routinely praise individuals who refuse to give up or find silver linings in times of hardship. The wellness industry promotes relentless self-improvement as the path to resilience.

In my work as a professor of writing studies, I research how people use writing to navigate trauma and practice resilience. I have witnessed thousands of students turn to the written word to work through emotions and find a sense of belonging. Their writing habits suggest that writing fosters resilience. Insights from psychology and neuroscience can help explain how.

## Writing rewires the brain

In the 1980s, psychologist James Pennebaker developed a therapeutic technique called expressive writing to help patients process trauma and psychological challenges. With this technique, continuously journaling about something painful helps create mental distance from the experience and eases its cognitive load.

In other words, externalizing emotional distress through writing fosters safety. Expressive writing turns pain into a metaphorical book on a shelf, ready to be reopened with intention. It signals the brain, “You don’t need to carry this anymore.”



Sometimes you can write your way through difficult emotions.

*Grace Cary/Moment via Getty Images*

Translating emotions and thoughts into words on paper is a complex mental task. It involves retrieving memories and planning what to do with them, engaging brain areas associated with memory and decision-making. It also involves putting those memories into language, activating the brain’s visual and motor systems.

Writing things down supports memory consolidation — the brain’s conversion of short-term memories into long-term ones. The process of integration makes it possible for people to reframe painful experiences and manage their emotions. In essence, writing can help free the mind to be in the here and now.

## **Taking action through writing**

The state of presence that writing can elicit is not just an abstract feeling; it reflects complex activity in the nervous system.

Brain imaging studies show that putting feelings into words helps regulate emotions. Labeling emotions — whether through expletives and emojis or carefully chosen words — has multiple benefits. It calms the amygdala, a cluster of neurons that detects threat and triggers the fear response: fight, flight, freeze or fawn. It also engages the prefrontal cortex, a part of the brain that supports goal-setting and problem-solving.

In other words, the simple act of naming your emotions can help you shift from reaction to response. Instead of identifying with your feelings and mistaking them for facts, writing can help you simply become aware of what's arising and prepare for deliberate action.

Even mundane writing tasks like making a to-do list stimulate parts of the brain involved in reasoning and decision-making, helping you regain focus.

## **Making meaning through writing**

Choosing to write is also choosing to make meaning. Studies suggest that having a sense of agency is both a prerequisite for, and an outcome of, writing.

Researchers have long documented how writing is a cognitive activity — one that people use to communicate, yes, but also to understand the human experience. As many in the field of writing studies recognize, writing is a form of thinking — a practice that people never stop learning. With that, writing has the potential to continually reshape the mind. Writing not only expresses but actively creates identity.

Writing also regulates your psychological state. And the words you write are themselves proof of regulation — the evidence of resilience.

Popular coverage of human resilience often presents it as extraordinary endurance. News coverage of natural disasters implies that the more severe the trauma, the greater the personal growth. Pop psychology often equates resilience with unwavering optimism. Such representations can obscure ordinary forms of adaptation. Strategies people already use to cope with everyday life — from rage-texting to drafting a resignation letter — signify transformation.

## **Building resilience through writing**

These research-backed tips can help you develop a writing practice conducive to resilience:

**1. Write by hand whenever possible.** In contrast to typing or tapping on a device, handwriting requires greater cognitive coordination. It slows your thinking, allowing you to process information, form connections and make meaning.

**2. Write daily.** Start small and make it regular. Even jotting brief notes about your day — what happened, what you're feeling, what you're planning or intending — can help you get thoughts out of your head and ease rumination.

**3. Write before reacting.** When strong feelings surge, write them down first. Keep a notebook within reach and make it a habit to write it before you say it. Doing so can support reflective thinking, helping you act with purpose and clarity.

**4. Write a letter you never send.** Don't just write down your feelings — address them to the person or situation that's troubling you. Even writing a letter to yourself can provide a safe space for release without the pressure of someone else's reaction.

**5. Treat writing as a process.** Any time you draft something and ask for feedback on it, you practice stepping back to consider alternative perspectives. Applying that feedback through revision can strengthen self-awareness and build confidence.

Resilience may be as ordinary as the journal entries people scribble, the emails they exchange, the task lists they create — even the essays students pound out for professors.

The act of writing is adaptation in progress.

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