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## **Current Issues**

Jill Parmenter, Column Editor

### **Reflective Writing for Personal-Professional Balance**

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#### **Abstract**

*Speech-language pathologists and audiologists face many stressors in serving clients' needs and fulfilling administrative/supervisory responsibilities. Coping with these stressors is even more difficult when work experiences intersect with personal concerns, memories, and beliefs. As stressors and reactions mount, we can become imbalanced with distracted thoughts, intrusive emotions, and confusion about the meaning of our discomfort. One approach for transitioning from imbalance to balance is reflective writing. In reflective writing, the individual expresses thoughts and feelings freely, followed by self-directed questions and continued writing. Ongoing reflective writing can lead to a renewed sense of emotional calm and mental clarity and a deeper understanding of oneself. This article describes a procedure for beginning the reflective writing process and encourages professionals to see personal-professional balance as an important aspect of professional effectiveness.*

You have just finished a stressful supervisory meeting—you're not sure why you find working with that graduate student so draining—and you see your phone message light blinking. You wonder if your teenage daughter, whom you left at home with a fever, is feeling worse. You listen to the message but don't call back. You have only a few minutes before a team conference with distraught family members of a child newly diagnosed with hearing loss and autism. As you search for some paperwork on your desk, you realize you have a late afternoon meeting with a struggling CF candidate. "Not what I'm in the mood for," you mutter to yourself. You proceed to the conference, lost in thought, and nearly bump into your colleague. "Sorry," you say, "I'm not quite all here."

Do you recognize yourself in the above scenario? Even if the details of your work and personal life are different, you likely have days when you become distracted and irritable in the face of challenging sessions, worrisome personal concerns, high-emotion clients, and difficult personnel matters.

We spend much of our professional time helping others—from clients and families to students, staff, and colleagues. These relationships carry with them stressors and emotions that we can absorb and react to without conscious awareness. In addition, we all must juggle the demands of our personal lives while keeping our work personas fresh and available to meet others' needs. Is it any wonder that we sometimes find our composure lacking or our patience waning? Maintaining balance is a challenge we all face.

Balance can be viewed from different perspectives, but as used here it refers to being emotionally calm and mentally organized, without being pulled unduly in one direction or another (Stone-Goldman, 2010b). When balanced, we are aware of stressors, but do not react unwisely to them. We may have strong feelings, even painful ones, but we do not lose sight of the whole picture, which includes hope and potential for change as well as sadness, disappointment, and loss. We do not confuse our beliefs and values with those of others. We can fulfill our work responsibilities with honesty, clarity, and purpose.

## ***The Personal-Professional Intersection***

Consider the phrase “personal-professional intersection.” We are accustomed to the idea that we keep our personal and professional lives separate. We do not tell clients our troubles or ask them to cheer us up on a rough day. We refrain from complaining about our home life to our supervisor or sharing too many personal details with supervisees. Keeping details of our personal life private is one way we maintain appropriate professional boundaries (Stone & Olswang, 1989).

So why talk about personal-professional intersection if the goal is to keep the personal information separate? The truth is, our personal and professional experiences do interact, regardless of how skilled we are at keeping them separate on the surface (Katz & Johnson, 2006). Our life stories, including successes, failures, hopes, disappointments, rewards, losses, and indignities, live within us. Sometimes these stories seem silent and hidden; other times, awake and raging. Whether we realize it or not, threads from these stories routinely weave their way into our daily life.

Life’s events on any given day—whether at work or home—activate memories and feelings that potentially influence our reactions to immediate events. Worry about your sick child makes you anxious around a sick client of a similar age. Rumors about cutbacks at work awaken economic fears. An elderly patient’s struggle to communicate reminds you of your mother’s decline. A gentleman’s refusal to consider hearing aids echoes the ongoing debate with your father. A young employee’s manner triggers feelings about your teenager.

Our responsibilities to clients, families, staff, and team members demand that we become aware of how our personal experience affects us and that we discharge emotions that may cloud professional judgment. We can block immediate distractions with disciplined attention to clients or paperwork, but in the long run we cannot prevent the flow of emotion, memory, and association between different parts of our life. This flow between the personal and the professional is an important factor in our balance (Stone-Goldman, 2010b). When life’s demands or accrued emotions intensify on the personal or the professional side, the effects bleed through to the other and we become imbalanced.

## ***Writing for Personal Growth and Health***

Writing for personal growth is a well-established method. Progoff (1975) introduced intensive journaling as a support to transpersonal psychotherapy, and many authors encourage individuals to incorporate writing in self-help and therapy contexts (DeSalvo, 1999). Additionally, artists and authors have promoted various forms of free writing for deepening creativity, reducing writer’s block, and exploring spirituality (Cameron, 1992; Goldberg, 1986; Lamott, 1994). This type of writing is designed to increase the free flow of emotions and thoughts and to help the individual express himself or herself authentically.

Writing also has been promoted to help individuals deal with emotional distress and illness. Pennebaker (2004) has been a strong proponent of disclosure through expressive writing (writing one’s emotions freely) as a way to recover from trauma and loss. His research paradigm (Pennebaker & Beall, 1986) fostered extensive research that continues today. A

growing body of literature (reviewed in Kacewicz, Slatcher, & Pennebaker, 2007) gives evidence that writing can reduce anxiety from trauma, promote emotional well-being in healthy adults, and reduce some symptoms related to medical conditions.

## ***Reflective Practice/Reflective Writing***

Professionals from many disciplines incorporate reflective practice into training and clinical work (Levett-Jones, 2007; Moses & Shapiro, 1996; Schon, 1987). In reflective practice, the goal is to think actively in a way that bridges the theoretical and the practical, explores underlying meanings in experience, and increases self-understanding (Geller & Foley, 2009; Loughran, 2002; Schon, 1987). In its most basic form, reflective practice means practicing the act of reflecting (thinking, while taking different perspectives) as applied to an experience or topic of importance.

Reflective writing combines reflective practice with aspects of several writing methods, including expressive writing (Pennebaker, 2004), journal writing (Boud, 2001), narrative writing (Levett-Jones, 2007), and free writing (Goldberg, 1986). In reflective writing, we write spontaneously on selected personal and professional topics as a way to free our thoughts and emotions and bring content to the surface. After writing, we ask ourselves questions about what we have written to open new lines of thought. We then continue with more writing, to allow ourselves to move deeper into our ideas and feelings (Stone-Goldman, 2010c).

The purpose of this article is to introduce speech-language pathologists (SLPs) and audiologists to reflective writing as a tool for understanding the personal-professional intersection and restoring balance. A procedure is described to help the reader begin the writing process, from topic selection to writing to reviewing/reflecting. Through ongoing reflective writing, one can discharge emotions, gain new perspectives, and transition towards better balance.

## ***Reflective Writing Procedure***

Following are procedures to help you begin and develop reflective writing. As noted above, reflective writing combines aspects of a variety of writing approaches, and the procedures in this article share elements with works by Cameron (1992), Goldberg (1986), Pennebaker (2004), and Dowrick (2009).

### **Getting Started**

The first natural question is, “What should you write about?” We will examine three categories of potential writing topics.

One potential topic is immediate mental, emotional, and body states. In this category, write about what you are thinking and feeling in the moment. Potential goals are to increase your awareness of troubling or distracting thoughts and feelings, calm yourself, and prepare yourself to function in the next required event of your life.

You may choose to write about a recent or upcoming event that is on your mind (DeSalvo, 1999; Pennebaker, 2004). Potential goals are to process/understand what happened at a recent event, prepare emotionally and practically for a future event, explore the meaning of the event, and reduce the associated emotional charge. This can be especially helpful when you find emotions lingering from an experience (e.g., when you remain frustrated after a meeting with a family or administrator or when you feel unduly worried about an upcoming event such as a meeting with the legal team or with an upset supervisee).

The final topic category is for complex situations, perhaps long past, that were powerful in their effect on you. A “story that sticks” is what the name implies: a story that stays with you, perhaps longer than seems appropriate and often with some discomfort. If you are aware

of stories that fit this category, you should put them on your list, though you may find it easier to begin reflective writing with a simpler focus.

### **Creating a Topics List**

Creating a list of potential writing topics is a good starting point (Goldberg, 1986). Take 5 minutes and list all the topics that come to mind. Do not try to write about these now, just develop a list of phrases that identify the writing topic. Review the topic categories described above to give you ideas.

If you remain unsure of what to put on the list, ask yourself these questions

- What do you feel right now?
- Is there anything on your mind distracting you?
- As you look back on the week, what stands out as having been important or emotionally potent?
- Is there anything coming up next week that makes you feel stressed, angry, or fearful?
- Do any past clinical events stick in your mind despite your efforts to let them go?
- Are there any current clients/families/students/colleagues whom you cannot stop thinking about?
- This article talks about “balance.” What does “balance” mean to you?
- If you were talking to a friend, what would you say is “really bugging” you right now?

You do not need to worry about whether these topics are professional or personal. Whatever is happening personally can build up and “leak out” over the professional aspects of your life. Professional matters evoke strong personal feelings. You will find the intersection as you write.

### **The Writing**

You are now ready to write. To begin, choose one topic from your list. The goal is to write as continuously as you can, without censoring your thoughts or stopping to make corrections. Do not worry about sentence structure or spelling. This writing is for you alone, and it will not be seen or evaluated by others. You may write by hand or on the computer. Handwriting and keyboard accuracy do not matter as long as you can read your writing. Plan to write for at least 10 to 20 minutes.

You may wish to help yourself begin by using a writing prompt. Writing prompts are cues that help you initiate the writing process or explore a certain type of writing (Dowrick, 2009). Writing prompts can be in the form of pictures, story scenarios, questions, or cloze statements (see Stone-Goldman, 2010d, for a review of writing prompts and Internet links to different kinds of prompts). Below are prompts in the form of cloze statements.

- I am writing about \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing).
- When I think about work this week I get \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing).
- My mind is buzzing with \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing).
- When I think about balance I \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing.)
- The topic on my list that makes me nervous is \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing.)
- I’ve avoided thinking about \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing).

- I can't stop thinking about \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing.)

If you experience difficulty, repeat your last sentence or continue with "I am stuck and I want to keep writing about \_\_\_\_\_" (and then keep writing whatever comes to mind). You do not have to "get somewhere" with your writing or achieve a particular outcome. Your goal is to write freely, without trying to control your thoughts or feelings.

One barrier that crops up for some people is the critical voice. This voice can be from a teacher who overcorrected and devalued your writing, your mother or father, or your own harsh inner judge. If that voice comes up to discourage you, just keep writing. If the voice feels intrusive or disruptive, write what the voice says and respond to it with more writing. Eventually you will settle into your own writing and the critical voice will fade (however, you may have to dismiss this voice more than once).

### **After You Write**

Now is the time to read what you have written and engage in reflection. Review your text with the goal of evaluating what was put in print from a more conscious perspective than when you were in the act of writing. Be curious and nonjudgmental. What jumps out at you? What brings up a wave of emotion? What surprises you? What makes you smile or grimace? What makes you say, "I have more to say about that?"

You should ask questions about the words you have written: "What did I mean by this?" "What am I feeling here?" "Why did I use that harsh word?" "What else could this mean?" Pay attention to written "slips of the tongue" such as word substitution; what association do you have to those words?

It is important to look for hints about themes or stories that might recur in your life. "What does this remind me of?" "Have I felt like this/acted like this before?" "Does this sound like a story I have told before?" You can note your answers to any of your questions by writing comments in the margins, highlighting phrases or passages with a marker, or keeping a list of questions for future writing.

The next time you write, whether immediately or much later, focus your writing on one of the phrases/topics that caught your attention, or use one of the questions you asked yourself as a writing prompt. This can help you uncover a new layer underneath your original writing. You may be surprised at the directions your writing takes when you "write into" a phrase from previous writing. You may find yourself making unexpected associations, suddenly remembering a seemingly small incident, or returning with renewed intensity to the previous topic. As with all reflective writing, you need not worry about your focus; there is no right or wrong content.

If you need help getting started on your next writing, here are some writing prompts:

- I wrote about \_\_\_\_\_ before, and it really made me start thinking about \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing).
- I want to keep writing about \_\_\_\_\_ because \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing).
- When I see what I wrote, I realize \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing).
- The phrase that stands out to me is \_\_\_\_\_, which makes me think of \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing).
- I'm really surprised that \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing).
- This writing made me remember \_\_\_\_\_ (then keep writing).

### **Writing Your Stories: Stories that Stick**

Once you have become comfortable with the reflective writing process, you may wish to tackle writing about more complex situations, mentioned earlier as “stories that stick.” These are typically elaborate stories that we remember with a heavy emotional charge long after the fact. They can originate from personal or professional experience and most often involve challenging relationships. We are left with a feeling that we cannot shed the emotions of the relationship. We may have an idea of why the story bothers us so much, or we may have only the uncomfortable emotional charge. These stories can become a source of imbalance, keeping us awake at night, showing up in a new form, or leaving us feeling burdened and burned out (Stone-Goldman, 2009).

The process of writing and working with a “story that sticks” is more lengthy and complicated than the reflective writing described thus far. Although exploring these stories is beyond the scope of this article, I encourage you to keep notes when you live through such a story or when you find yourself remembering one. By writing down the story in detail you may be able to reduce some emotion or illuminate important elements.

## ***Reflective Writing Over Time***

Like any skill, reflective writing takes practice. The first step is becoming comfortable with the continuous writing and with the self-directed questioning. As you continue to write, you will observe what topics pull you into deeper writing and what themes and associations recur in your writing. You will be able to track your individual responses and fine-tune your writing routine; for example, you can note how writing affects your moods and mental states, how it fits into your schedule, and whether it does lead you to greater balance.

At some point you may wish to share the experience of reflective writing with others. One option is to write with a partner. If done with trust and agreed-upon rules, writing with someone and then reading aloud can be powerful and enlightening. The goal of shared reflective writing is for each individual to be witness to the other’s writing, not to evaluate or interpret (Stone-Goldman, 2010a, 2010c).

You may decide that what you are learning through your writing is so important for your professional effectiveness that you want to share your insights with a supervisor or mentor. In fact, reflective practice is traditionally done in a relationship with a guide (Geller & Foley, 2009; Schon, 1987), and your private reflective writing can bridge logically to reflective practices involving others. Reflective writing is not meant to supplant relationships that offer growth, support, and guidance.

Finally, please note that reflective writing often feels therapeutic, but it is not, in itself, psychotherapy. If you have many “stories that stick” (especially if they are “ultra sticky”—not being released), and if troubling scenarios keep recurring, you may need help sorting through the themes and moving on from the feelings. Reflective writing can be an adjunct to therapy (DeSalvo, 1999), but it is not a substitute for the help provided by a professional psychotherapist or counselor.

## ***Conclusions***

We may find it easy to identify the many stressors that contribute to imbalance, but the balance we strive for is not easy to sustain. Normal life is full of unpredictability, change, and frustrations, with human beings who have rich stories, strong reactions, and imperfections. We all have our good days and bad, and sometimes our work world seems like a huge repository of everyone’s “sticky stories.” We should not be surprised to discover how easily we transition from balance to imbalance.

Finding personal-professional balance is not a one-time event or a permanent destination. It is best seen as a day trip we must repeat over and over. Reflective writing is one

way to help face the ongoing challenge of the personal-professional intersection. If we are persistent, we will become increasingly skilled at understanding ourselves and our responses, and we will experience enough moments of balance to make us eager to stay on the journey.

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