

40 Writing Prompts for Therapy

✿ *How to use writing in your therapy sessions AND*
✿ *40 prompts to get you started*



Photo by Kateryna Hliznitsova on Unsplash

40 Writing Prompts for Therapy

© 2023 by Phyllis Capanna

For Possibility Printables

All Rights Reserved.

The material in this work is intended for personal use only. No commercial use is allowed. You may not copy or distribute this work in any form, physical or electronic for any purpose. This work is the property of the author and is covered under U. S. Copyright. This booklet is not intended to diagnose or treat any condition and is to be used at the sole discretion of the reader.



40 Writing Prompts for Therapy

Writing in therapy, like drawing in therapy, brings out different emotional content than talking. It can be the first time you hear your client's "voice," be it halting, expressive, passionate or shy. Because writing involves movement, it is a more holistic activity than talking. It can be a useful adjunct, especially for times when your client has "nothing" to say.

It's seldom mentioned that writing actually has two parts to it: writing and reading aloud. The reading aloud can be as powerful or more powerful than the act of writing. It is an experience of taking a healthy risk and, for some clients, hearing themselves—and being heard—in a whole new way that can be very empowering.

What you'll need


1. Blank paper, lined or unlined.
2. Good, smooth pen.
3. Boundaries around the activity. (More on this below.)
4. A timer.
5. Writing prompts.

How to introduce writing into your session

Writing might be something that's come up before, either from your client, because they've mentioned they like to journal, or from you because you've mentioned what a useful therapeutic tool it is. It can be framed as a way to go deeper into a topic that the client is ready to explore, but talking just isn't helping, or you the therapist are unsure what questions will unlock the client's mind around this. Writing can be a warm-up to talking, a wrap-up, a way to talk about something that the client finds difficult to speak about, or simply an excursion into topics that haven't come up through the usual methods.

Boundaries

It can feel vulnerable and scary to write something that a therapist (or anyone) is going to see. Setting ground rules and expectations can help. Give your client the option to not share as well as the final say on what happens to their writing. Unlike drawing, it can defeat the purpose for the client to explain what they've written without actually reading it aloud.



But equal to setting boundaries to establish emotional safety is setting boundaries to insure the writing will be therapeutic and not overly worked over, as if it's a school paper.

The boundaries I usually set when introducing a writing activity are:

- Write the first thing that comes to mind
- Don't worry about proper grammar or spelling
- Don't read back, just keep writing until the timer goes off.
- If you get stuck, write, "I'm stuck," or, "I don't know what to say," or, "What I really want to say is..."
- We'll write for XX minutes. (5 minutes minimum, 15 max)

It might help to share excerpts from some noted writing books, such as *Writing Down the Bones*, by Natalie Goldberg and *The Artist's Way*, by Julia Cameron. Both these writing teachers talk about not censoring yourself when writing and being open to the unexpected.

The main idea is, without saying it directly, you want to, as much as possible set the stage for the client to lose control, at least that top layer of propriety.

To Write or Not to Write

Whether or not you do the writing with the client depends on the setting, your relationship with the client, and, frankly, whether or not you feel like it. It can feel a bit like splitting your brain to both let go in writing and be the keeper of the boundaries in the session. I have written in a group setting in outpatient psychiatry, and I've chosen not to write in individual psychotherapy sessions.

Be prepared, though, that if you write, you may be expected to read. I feel it's totally fair to heavily edit what you share aloud, but if it feels like it would be a good idea so that you can model how to do it, then go for it.

Overcoming "I don't know how to write."

Writing is another common area of expression in which trauma and unpleasant experiences from school or elsewhere might result in an aversion to the activity. Explain that this kind of writing is not creative writing, that the client will not have to make up a story or write an essay. I've found the best way to get a client over the hump of reluctance is to frame it as experimental, and to assure them that if it's a flop, you'll move on without a fuss.

How to Have Reading Aloud Be Therapeutic

After writing comes reading aloud. This can be terrifying, but it can also be exciting in a way that can only be experienced to understand. That's why I advocate for you the therapist reading your work aloud, if only to yourself, so that you can see for yourself what it feels like.

The most important thing about this part of the process is that less is more. Give the words the client is reading aloud plenty of space to breathe and take up space. Be sparing with comments. Help the client respond to their own writing in the fullest way they can.

In keeping with the "no fuss" approach, I usually simply invite the client to read. "Would you like to read what you've written?" Usually does it. When they're done, I usually say nothing, in order to let the words settle. Then, some obvious questions arise: What was it like to hear yourself say that? What was it like to write this? What do you think about that? What's surprising about this for you?

There is an exquisite practice, invented by Natalie Goldberg, called "Recall," which you may not want to do formally, but which does give a helpful framework for responding to clients' writings. The practice of Recall is one in which the listener simply says aloud specific words or phrases they recall from what's just been read aloud. These are incomplete sentences, fragments, whatever stuck out, quoted verbatim. "my grandmother's arms..." "the way he looked at me..." "purple cabbage...."

Recall is done in writing groups and may feel too awkward and out of context in a therapy setting, but what I love about it is the complete lack of opinion or coloring by the listener. It's the most direct, undiluted form of feedback: "This is what I heard you say." Literally. It can be amazingly affirming to have your own words said back to you. Recall has the power to convey that the client has been heard.

No part of therapeutic writing is without therapeutic value. The more you do it, the more you will see its potential for deepening the therapy experience for both you and your clients.

On the next page are 40 writing prompts to get you started. Enjoy!

40 Writing Prompts for Therapy

1. Today I feel
2. I'm surprised to find
3. I remember
4. I forget
5. One thing you should know about me is
6. One thing I'd like everyone to know is
7. One thing I should say but it's hard is
8. I'm uncomfortable when
9. I feel confident when
10. I feel I am
11. I'm proud of
12. I'm sorry I
13. I would love it if
14. I really need
15. My needs...
16. Most of my energy is going to
17. When I think about courage, I think
18. My favorite quality in myself is
19. My favorite quality in others is
20. I've never gotten over
21. One feeling I feel the most is
22. One feeling I rarely feel is
23. Fun is
24. Relaxation is
25. Stress is
26. Write a letter to someone you don't intend to send
27. Write a letter to your present self from a future self.
28. Write a letter of support to yourself.
29. Write about your strengths and weaknesses
30. Write about something that makes you happy/sad/angry
31. Write a prayer
32. Write a letter to your higher power/guardian angel etc
33. Write a list of things you love
34. Write a list of things you fear but would like to do anyway
35. If I didn't have to do it perfectly, I might try
36. Write a recipe for a happy day/a date/ a family outing, etc.
37. Write a recipe for a successful birthday, or other celebration
38. Write a letter from the future telling how you got out of a current difficulty.
39. You'd never know it, but
40. I'm most content when

Visit the Possibility Printables Etsy Store for more digital resources for therapists and clients.

- Creative Self-Expression Workbooks
 - Therapy Office Art
 - Recovery Resources
- Group and Individual Therapy Activity Bundles
 - Printable Bookmarks

It means the world to me to be able to support your work, whether you are a therapist or a client.

