

## WRITING TECHNIQUES

### Point of View Writing

Point of view writing was pioneered by Rita Charon, M.D. Ph.D., Associate Professor of Clinical Medicine at Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons.

**Definition:** Point of view writing adopts the patient's point of view to describe key life events and doctor-patient encounters.

**Technique:** A point of view writing exercise generally takes about 10-15 minutes. The student/physician first selects a patient about whom to write, on the basis of perceived difficulty or highly charged affect. The student/physician then writes in the first person voice ("I"), relating the patient's perspective, thoughts, and feelings about a recent doctor-patient encounter, personal or family illness, or other major life event. Pov writing generally contains information, knowledge, and insights actually known about the patient from past encounters and interviews, but also includes creatively imagined aspects of the patient's life that are unknown to the writer.

**Purpose:** The purpose of point of view writing is to help students/physicians enter more fully into the patient's perspective in order to develop increased understanding of and empathy for the patient's situation. The exercise also encourages the student/physician to be playful, imaginative, and creative in thinking about patients. Further, point of view writing helps students/physicians to understand that in the experience of illness, many different, sometimes competing, points of view exist simultaneously. Pov writing can decrease students' and physicians' feelings of frustration, anger, and helplessness when they find themselves "stuck" in dysfunctional patterns with patients, and for this reason is particularly useful with patients deemed "difficult." Finally, pov writing can also lead to new insights about patient domains that need further exploration, as well as to innovative strategies for communicating more effectively with the patient or approaching problematic treatment issue

### Mindful Writing

**Definition:** Mindful writing combines a centered, calm attitude with an intention of compassion and loving-kindness toward patients.

**Technique:** Preparation consists of relaxation strategies, mini-meditation, or prayer. The goal of these preparatory techniques is to help the student/physician establish the desired attitude and intention toward the patient. The student/physician then selects a patient who has "stayed with" him or her. Sometimes this is a patient who has died, or a patient who has "taught an important lesson" to the student/physician. Sometimes it is a patient of whom the student/physician is particularly fond, or someone who has caused the student/physician great anguish or emotional turmoil. After choosing the patient, the student/physician spends 10-15 minutes writing *from the perspective of a wise counselor* in the second person voice ("you") to him or herself. The format can be a letter, imagined speech, or any other form of direct address.

**Purpose:** The purpose of this exercise is first for the student/physician to learn to be as present, "awake," and "centered" as possible when reflecting on a patient encounter. Then, from this place of wholeness, the goal of mindful writing is to cultivate feelings of compassion and loving-kindness toward self and patient. Other outcomes may include achieving resolution of a problematic issue concerning the patient or

forgiveness of either self or other. Mindful writing encourages students/physicians to take risks about exploring who they are as physicians and as human beings in a calm, accepting, and nonjudgmental manner. It also encourages them to locate and utilize their deepest wisdom.

**Reflective writing/Write It Thrice:** Choose a difficult/memorable patient encounter and write three narratives of the event. In the first, concentrate on describing the event in as much detail as possible. In the second, try to stand back from the event and begin to reflect on what was going on, the feelings of self and others, the possible meanings of the event described. In the third, see if you can deepen still further your understanding of the possible meaning and significance of this encounter for both you and the patient. Engage in self-questioning, take into consideration the views and perspectives of others, and consider the relationship of the event described to past events and patterns.

**Letter-writing:** Imagine you are writing a letter to someone (patient to doctor, patient to family member, doctor to patient, doctor to mentor). Use this exercise to share about and reflect on a patient, a diagnosis, or a difficult/memorable patient encounter.

**Poetry:** Write a poem (using either a rhyme scheme or free verse) to reflect on a patient, a family member, a colleague, or a difficult/memorable patient encounter.





