



WRITING AND MENTAL HEALTH

Educator Tool



Table of Contents

| | |
|--|----|
| Introduction..... | 1 |
| Social Emotional Learning and Writing..... | 3 |
| How to Use this Educator Tool..... | 4 |
| Writing to Process..... | 6 |
| Elementary Resources..... | 6 |
| Secondary Resources..... | 7 |
| Writing to Express..... | 8 |
| Elementary Resources..... | 8 |
| Secondary Resources..... | 9 |
| Writing to Reflect..... | 10 |
| Elementary Resources..... | 10 |
| Secondary Resources..... | 11 |
| Mentor Texts..... | 12 |
| Elementary..... | 12 |
| Secondary..... | 13 |
| Additional Resource..... | 14 |

INTRODUCTION

At 826, we strive to create safe and brave spaces where students can learn, grow, play, and take risks in their writing. Our chapters exist as a third space—somewhere other than home and school—and use a variety of youth development techniques to support each student’s whole self, including their social and emotional development and mental health. In this space, program staff prioritize writing instruction that centers students’ whole selves, including routines that support their social and emotional development and their mental health. While students have always needed spaces where they can be unapologetically themselves, this need has grown ever more urgent in a post-pandemic era: research has shown that 10 million students in K–12 public schools nationwide need mental health support.

Our favorite way to support students in this journey is, of course, through writing. We view writing as an outlet for releasing pent-up emotions, planning big dreams, processing arguments, and even escaping those daily annoyances that can drag you down. The writing resources and activities in this Educator Tool are designed to help your students process and reflect on how they’re feeling and help them to have a little fun while they’re expressing themselves, too.

INTRODUCTION

We recognize that supporting students in their mental health journey is a team effort: whether you're just beginning to tap into the power of writing to support students' mental health, or you are well-versed in the practice, we're grateful to join forces in this work. To see more about how 826 uses writing to positively impact students' mental health, we invite you to check out our free report, [*The Home We Create: A Case Study on How Writing Positively Impacts Social, Emotional, and Mental Health Outcomes of Students.*](#)



Talk to each other.
Connect.
Heal each other.

MAHGONY , GRADE 11, 826 NEW ORLEANS

SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING AND WRITING

Social and emotional learning (SEL) is a process that addresses how different components of students' social and emotional development are taught in schools. While SEL does not replace mental health services, it can support a student's mental health journey by teaching strategies to process, express, and self-reflect on big emotions and events. Writing can be used as a tool in all three of the following areas:

- **Process:** Mental health is not an achievement; it's a journey. No matter where you are in that journey—helpless or stressed or calm—getting thoughts out of your mind and onto paper can help name and acknowledge them.
- **Expression:** Creative writing as a means for expression can be used to help students make sense of the world around them. Through stories and poems, whether fact or fiction, creative writing offers students a chance to identify what they believe and value.
- **Self-Reflection:** Writing provides a space and an opportunity to turn inward and listen to yourself. In this way, writing can be a meditative and healing practice that paves a path toward self-awareness. It's in the reflection stage that we connect what has happened to what will happen. Ultimately, it is in this space that we grow.

HOW TO USE THIS EDUCATOR TOOL

We believe that supporting students' mental health starts by creating a safe and brave space in which they can explore their emotions through writing. To learn more about how 826 uses writing to co-create safe and brave spaces with students, we suggest you read our Educator Tool [*How to Co-Create a Safe and Brave Space with Students*](#) before you begin.

This Educator Tool is divided into these sections: Writing to Process, Writing to Express, and Writing for Self-Reflection. You can decide to work through the resources sequentially, from Writing to Process to Writing for Self-Reflection, or you choose prompts in a more à la carte fashion. You know your students and their needs best. However you decide to use the resources, we recommend you also make time in your daily schedule for freewriting, in which students have the freedom to write about whatever they'd like.

“

“[Writing] actually helps our brain release the anxiety and find a place of calm.”

ARIELLE JOHNSON, PSYCHOTHERAPIST AT RAINBOW HEALTH

HOW TO USE THIS EDUCATOR TOOL

To help you visualize how you can use writing in your classroom to build routines that support students’ mental health, and to further engage student authors in learning, each section includes resources from 826 Digital:

| | Sparks | Lessons | Projects | Videos |
|---------------------------------|--|---|---|--|
| Description | Quick, adaptable writing prompts and activities. They help hone a specific skill or inspire big ideas. | Engage students deeply in the writing process, with a focus on writing skill development and drafting. They’re built around a writing genre, topic, and writing standard(s) | Multisession units on a topic or theme. They help teach process and revision while students produce a polished piece. | Feature critically acclaimed authors and educators providing their own twist on Sparks and other writing activities. |
| Average recommended time | 30 minutes | 2 hours or 2 sessions | 3 or more sessions | 30 minutes - 1 hour or 1 session |

Each section also includes Mentor Texts: pieces from 826 Network students that connect to the section theme and showcase the power, brilliance, and joy that emerge when young people write for change.

- These pieces of student writing (and more!) are also available on [826 Digital’s Writing Gallery](#).
- Mentor Texts reflect a range of topics in a variety of genres.
- Some pieces are inspired directly by the section resources, and others showcase writing for change in a myriad of other ways.

WRITING TO PROCESS: ELEMENTARY

Processing an emotion means to name it and work toward accepting it. These resources help students expand their emotional vocabulary, practice mindfulness, and even to use humor as a tool for processing their feelings.

Elementary (Grades 1-5)

Writing to Process: Elementary. (SPARK, GRADES 1-5)

Writing can be a powerful tool when working through feelings of grief, sadness, or anger. This Spark creates an intentional opportunity for youth to write and speak about what is on their minds.

Make Me Laugh. (SPARK, GRADES 1-3)

To adapt this lesson for processing emotions, invite students to turn the thing that's making them feel afraid, angry, or anxious into something completely comical. Flipping the emotion inside out will make it feel smaller and more manageable!

Overcome the Overwhelm. (SPARK, GRADES 1-3)

Students help an imaginary friend, while sharing strategies for recognizing and overcoming the feeling of overwhelm.

Fill My Shoes. (VIDEO, GRADES 3-5)

826michigan staffer Kinyel Friday shares a writing prompt that uses personification to bring emotions to life.

Doors to the Future. (LESSON, GRADES 3-6)

This lesson invites students to imagine the future, but it can be adapted to help students visualize their feelings. Follow Step 2 of Session 1, emphasizing the feeling behind the door rather than the future. Feel free to modify the questions to better suit this new purpose. After you've completed the visualization exercise, give students time to journal about what they saw and felt.

WRITING TO PROCESS: SECONDARY

Processing an emotion means to name it and work toward accepting it. These resources help students expand their emotional vocabulary, practice mindfulness, and even to use humor as a tool for processing their feelings.

Secondary (Grades 6-12)

Doors to the Future. (LESSON, GRADES 3-6)

To reframe this for older students, follow Step 2 of Session 1, emphasizing the feeling behind the door rather than the future. Feel free to modify the questions to better suit this new purpose. After you've completed the visualization exercise, give students time to journal about what they saw and felt.

Poetry as Retelling. (LESSON, GRADES 6-8)

Reimagining the ending to a challenging experience is a beautiful way to understand the feelings connected to that event. This lesson uses a Mentor Text by Eve L. Ewing to walk students through that creative process.

Writing to Process: Secondary. (SPARK, GRADES 6-12)

Writing can be a powerful tool when working through feelings of grief, sadness, or anger. This Spark creates an intentional opportunity for youth to write and speak about what is on their minds.

Taboo Emotions with Tiphonie Yanique. (SPARK, GRADES 7-12)

In this Spark, students explore two taboo emotions, desire and fear, by mapping where these feelings dwell in their bodies and by using tactile language to describe their impact.

Writing and Mental Health with Arielle Johnson. (VIDEO, GRADES 6-12)

Students learn a concrete strategy for writing down their thoughts and feelings, with the goal of understanding them more clearly.

WRITING TO EXPRESS: ELEMENTARY

Writing for expression can take many forms—and doesn't always have to be focused on the hard stuff! These resources give students the opportunity to write creatively about the full spectrum of emotions, from anger to zeal.

Elementary (Grades 1-5)

Sensory Heart Mapping. (SPARK, GRADES 1-5)

Students identify their favorite sensory memories and transfer them to a visual heart map.

From a Friend. (LESSON, GRADES 1-5)

In this lesson, students write letters full of kindness and affirmation to someone special and reflect on the impact of being kind toward others.

An Ode to Pieces. (SPARK, GRADES 2-5)

Students define the word ode for themselves and identify the people and moments in their lives they'd like to celebrate in a poem.

Meaning from Shape. (VIDEO, GRADES 3-5)

Adapt this lesson for mental health writing by asking students to write a poem about a specific emotion—one they're feeling right now, perhaps—and then pair it with a shape to represent that emotion.

What Do Feelings Sound Like?. (SPARK, GRADES 1-3)

This lesson introduces onomatopoeia as an additional technique students can use to express their feelings.

WRITING TO EXPRESS: SECONDARY

Writing for expression can take many forms—and doesn't always have to be focused on the hard stuff! These resources give students the opportunity to write creatively about the full spectrum of emotions, from anger to zeal.

Secondary (Grades 6-12)

Ekphrastic Poetry. (LESSON, GRADES 5-8)

Ekphrastic poems draw connections between text and images. Adapt this lesson by asking students to write poems that express how a piece of art makes them feel.

A Place Worth Being with Jason Reynolds. (SPARK, GRADES 6-12)

Students write a personal narrative in which they describe themselves as a place—not a specific place, but all the things a place consists of.

Meaning from Shape. (VIDEO, GRADES 6-12)

Adapt this lesson for mental health writing by asking students to write a poem about a specific emotion—one they're feeling right now, perhaps—and then create a shape that represents that emotion.

Cataloging Gratitude. (LESSON, GRADES 9-12)

What happens when we start from a place of gratitude? In this lesson, students use Ross Gay's "Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude" as a catalyst for a daily gratitude journal.

WRITING TO REFLECT: ELEMENTARY

Through self-reflection, students have the opportunity to check in with themselves and grow. These resources support students in understanding the people, places, and things they value.

Elementary (Grades 1-5)

What's Your Happy?. (SPARK, GRADES 1-3)

Students create a poem that explores and shares the “happys” in their life.

Me, Myself, and I. (SPARK, GRADES 1-5)

After writing about their personal and social identities, students discover that what makes us unique is also what brings us together.

If Poems. (SPARK, GRADES 1-5)

Students imagine what they would do if they were someone or something else.

Sense Memories with Caitlin Horrocks. (VIDEO, GRADES 3-5)

Students reflect on a place that means a lot to them and then describe it using sensory language.

Setting the Tone. (SPARK, GRADES 4-8)

This activity explores the way emotions change how we perceive settings. Students work in groups to create descriptions of apartments based on an emotion they draw from a hat.



The paper is the freedom / from all things that enslave
you. / Open your hands and let your words/ take you.

DIAMOND, GRADE 9, 826DC

WRITING TO REFLECT: SECONDARY

Through self-reflection, students have the opportunity to check in with themselves and grow. These resources support students in understanding the people, places, and things they value.

Secondary (Grades 6-12)

Letters, Undelivered. (SPARK, GRADES 6-12)

This activity prompts students to write words unspoken, in letters undelivered.

Memory Line. (SPARK, GRADES 6-12)

Students plot significant memories on a timeline in this reflective writing activity.

Where I'm From Poems. (LESSON, GRADES 7-12)

Inspired by George Ella Lyon's original poem, this lesson guides students through naming the people, places, and things that have shaped them.

Last Times with Amanda Gorman. (SPARK, GRADES 7-12)

Students recall "last times" in their lives and revisit the depth of their experience through writing.

Notice What You Notice with Austin Bunn. (VIDEO, GRADES 9-12)

Students are invited to reflect on what's important to them now and imagine who they will be in the future.

I Remember . . . with Natalie Moore. (VIDEO, GRADES 11-12)

In this lesson, students use journal entries to reflect on the events of their lives and how those events affect their moods.

MENTOR TEXTS: ELEMENTARY

Below are a few of our favorite texts written by 826 students that exemplify the ways writing can support mental health.

Elementary (Grades 1-5)

Love. (GRADE 1)

A poem about giving and receiving love.

Once Upon a Red Race Car. (GRADE 1)

A story about reaching out to others.

When You're Frustrated. (GRADE 2)

A student reflects on how to bounce back from frustration.

Why?. (GRADE 4)

A story about a bullying incident on the school bus.

The Sky. (GRADE 5)

In this poem, a student celebrates individuality.

A New Life. (GRADES 5-

A personal narrative about a teensie, tiny bit of jealousy for a new baby sister turning into love.

The Thing That Changes My Life. (GRADES 5-6)

This student's heartbreaking personal narrative describes what it can feel like to have your parents get divorced.

Worried. (GRADES 5-6)

A personal narrative about a trip to Ocean City, a lonely puppy, and sharing our fears with others.

MENTOR TEXTS: SECONDARY

Below are a few of our favorite texts written by 826 students that exemplify the ways writing can support mental health.

Secondary (Grades 6-12)

Laughter Means You're Alive. (GRADES 6-8)

This collaborative poem explores the many sides and senses of laughter.

School Blues. (GRADES 7-8)

A metaphorical poem about frustrations, from homework to homelessness.

Just Glitter and Be Questioning. (GRADES 7-8)

A student celebrates the journey of discovering whom to love.

Voices. (GRADE 8)

This poem features a student battling with the voices constricting her freedom.

Stupid Blue Screen. (GRADES 9-12)

Living in the digital world can create unwanted attachments, as one student laments.

Note to Self. (GRADE 9)

One teen writes a letter to his 14-year-old self, citing his past fears but looking towards his present, a brighter future.

Thoughts Onto Paper. (GRADES 9-10)

Glimpse into the mind of a student who considers artistic influences in her life.

Sunny Smiles. (GRADES 10-11)

This piece reminds us that a smile is not always what it seems.

Suitcase Blues. (GRADE 12)

A student recounts separation with a beloved friend through a nostalgic lens.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCE

Writing is just one path students can walk on their mental health journey. For more resources on how to support young people with improving their mental health, visit [The Jed Foundation's website](#).

The Jed Foundation (JED) is a nonprofit that protects emotional health and prevents suicide for our nation's teens and young adults, giving them the skills and support they need to thrive today . . . and tomorrow.