

Rewriting Your Story

Write a brief story about yourself and then rewrite it. Start with a couple of hundred words about something you struggle with psychologically – something that gets in your way and has a bit of a history to it. Be sure to describe some of that history and the internal and external ways that it interferes.

Once you've done that, get a pen and draw a circle around all words that are reactions: thoughts, feelings, memories, sensations, urges, or actual behavior. Don't circle explanations for *why* you reacted: just the reaction itself.

Now do another run through the story and with a pen underline every external situation or fact. I'm asking you to note reactions (circled) and external facts (underlined) – because the mind sometimes mixes the two, which makes the next step harder.

After those two tasks are done, here is your challenge: rewrite what you have just written so that the theme, meaning, outcome, or direction is totally different, but every item that is circled or underlined is included in your new story.

Mind you, I am *not* asking you to write a better story, or a happier one, or a truer one. It only needs to make sense, to fit well with the underlined and highlighted material.

Here is an example of the first story written by a client of mine. The external facts are underlined and reactions are “highlighted” here in boldface.

I was **sad** as a child. I felt **alone** and **neglected** – my mother seemed more interested in her own misery than her children. I did poorly in school because I was more **focused on my fears** than on learning. The other **children didn't really like me** and the teachers were as inattentive as my mother. I was frequently the object of bullying and I **thought I was stupid**. It wasn't until middle school when I **realized I was smart** when I entered a team academic competition and we won the whole county. They then tested me and sat me down to say I should be in the gifted class. All of a sudden, the teachers saw me differently – but the kids not so much. I got the sense that even my parents now saw me differently – like “who is this kid?” Other children seemed to think I was strange though. In high school the boys discovered me, and I learned I could get a lot of attention from them, which made me **feel great** on the outside – but I still **felt inadequate** on the inside. Somehow school success happened, but **I think it was in spite of myself**. I'm **surprised** I could get out of my way enough to even let that happen. Externally I guess some would say I'm a success, but with this history I live more with my own **self-doubts**.

Her rewrite was a revelation to her. What shocked her is that though not a single fact or reaction was changed, her conclusion changed considerably. You will recognize an ACT flavor in this rewrite, which makes sense since we had been working together within an ACT model.

I was **sad** as a child. When I felt **alone** and **neglected**, I **focused on my fears** which may have contributed to my initially doing poorly in school. I think I had initially internalized an idea that I saw my mother pursue – when you are miserable, focus on that, not on what you have in front of you. That cost her a lot in terms of her ability to focus on her children and take in the love that was around her. I learned a lesson from watching that. When I felt that the other children really **didn't really like me**, or the teachers were inattentive like my mother, or when I **thought I was stupid** and even when I was bullied, I focused on what I could actually do something about. For example, in middle school I entered a team academic competition and we won the whole county. The decision to enter that competition had a profound effect, because after that success, the teachers saw me differently, and I was tested. Soon they sat me down to say I should be in the gifted class. Even my parents then saw me differently – like “who is this kid?” That got things rolling in a very different direction, and it all came from these little choices I was making to try to learn from my mother's mistakes.

If some kids didn't appreciate me or thought I was strange, I found ways to get do the positive things that brought me healthy attention. I think my confidence and achievement attracted others – for example in high school the boys discovered me. I learned, whether I was **feeling great** or **feeling inadequate**, to focus on what I could do, one step at a time. I've had a **surprising amount** of school success as a result – I just got out of my own way and did what needed to be done. My mind tells me it was **in spite of myself**, but I guess we all have **self-doubts**. Bottom line, I'm a success.

Be careful with what your storytelling mind will do with this. Again, the point is not to write a positive story. This client ended up having a positive realization, and it's just fine if that is an outcome, but that is not the aim of the exercise – the point is to instill awareness that we are always *story-ing*. We are creating a narrative that is but one of many possible narratives. To heighten your awareness, you might even want to rewrite the story another time.

When we attribute our interpretations of our experiences to the situation rather than to our own way of seeing the situation, we shove our own meaning-making out of view. It's a form of self-delusion. This exercise is one way of applying defusion skills to our self-story so that we can take responsibility for the consequences that follow from the way we've interpreted events and how we've reacted to them. This rewriting process helps us to see that we have a great deal of freedom and creativity in how we weave the story of our life situations, even very difficult ones.

There is one last step in this exercise that really helps to drive that realization home. Ask yourself: What if there is no one, true story, but only a variety of different stories that can be used in different settings and circumstances to promote difference ways of being in the world? Which storyline will lead you forward to where you want to go? Which storyline seems most useful to you and under which circumstances? Whom would you rather determines which storyline gets your attention? The Dictator Within, or your transcendent self?