

A Study on the Psychological Healing Effects of Future-Oriented Self-Statement Writing Among College Students

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ABSTRACT

Objective: This study aimed to examine the psychological effects of future-oriented personal statement writing among college students and to explore its potential as a therapeutic intervention.

Materials and Methods: A survey was conducted with college students who participated in a future-oriented writing task, in which they composed personal statements from a projected time frame of five to ten years ahead.

Results: Engagement in future-oriented writing facilitated cognitive reframing, allowing participants to reinterpret present anxiety and perceived deficiencies as transitional states, thereby enhancing a sense of continuity and possibility in their life narratives.

Conclusion: Future-oriented personal statement writing may serve as a meaningful psychological intervention for college students by reducing anxiety and promoting positive developmental perspectives.

Keywords Future-oriented personal statement writing, Psychological healing, College students, Temporal distancing, Prospective thinking, Self-growth, Narrative identity

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, college students have been increasingly exposed to multifaceted psychological stressors, including academic burden, employment-related anxiety, interpersonal difficulties, and identity confusion. Among these factors, uncertainty regarding the future functions as a critical determinant that exacerbates emotional problems such as depression, anxiety, and feelings of helplessness. Such psychological distress not only diminishes individual quality of life but also adversely affects academic persistence and social adjustment.

Within this context, the need for preventive and therapeutic approaches aimed at enhancing the psychological well-being of college students has been increasingly emphasized.

Meanwhile, writing has been recognized as a psychological tool that facilitates emotional regulation and self-understanding through the process of articulating and reconstructing one's internal experiences.¹ In particular, expressive writing and narra-

tive-based writing have been reported to produce therapeutic effects by enabling individuals to ascribe meaning to their experiences and reorganize their self-narratives.² Within this line of research, the "personal statement" can be reconceptualized not merely as an employment-related document, but as a narrative text that integratively represents an individual's past experiences, present self-perception, and envisioned future self.³

The "future-oriented personal statement writing" emphasized in this study refers to a writing approach in which individuals describe themselves from the perspective of a projected future self. This method is distinguished from conventional retrospective writing in that it simultaneously incorporates temporal distancing and prospective cognition. Writing from a future standpoint enables individuals to perceive their present anxiety and perceived deficiencies not as fixed realities but as transitional states within an ongoing process, thereby facilitating the reconstruction of continuity and possibility in their life trajectories.⁴ In this sense, a future-oriented personal statement can be understood as a narrative text that integrates the future through the reinterpretation of past and present experiences. Through this process, learners are able to construct meaning in their lives and develop their narrative identity.⁵

Nevertheless, existing research has primarily approached personal statement writing from the perspective of enhancing employability or career education.⁶⁻⁸ In addition, training sessions on writing cover letters were held to help participants im-

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prove their business communication skills after securing employment.⁹ As the use of AI gains momentum, research on writing spec-based cover letters using generative AI is also worth noting.¹⁰ These studies are significant in that they help college students develop practical skills for their future careers. However, there is a concern that this functional approach cannot serve as an alternative to inner reflection among college students. In particular, empirical and qualitative investigations examining how future-oriented writing activities influence emotional stability, self-acceptance, and the perception of life meaning among college students remain scarce.

Accordingly, the present study aims to explore the effects of future-oriented personal statement writing on the psychological healing of college students. By doing so, it seeks to suggest the educational and counseling applicability of writing-based psychological intervention programs and to derive practical implications for their integration into university general education and student support systems.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

Survey Overview

This study was conducted to examine the effects of future-oriented personal statement writing on the psychological healing of college students. The survey was administered during the second semester of 2025 to two classes of first-year students enrolled in a "Writing I" course at a university (hereafter referred to as C University) located in Seoul. The "Writing I" course is a compulsory two-credit course; however, students in their second to fourth years may also enroll if they have not completed it during their first year.

The "personal statement set 5–10 years in the future" was assigned as a final alternative project. The assignment required students to address several components, including: (a) a detailed description of their prospective workplace and job role; (b) an exploration of an organization to which they would be committed; (c) personal strengths that could be highlighted in a professional context; (d) an overarching life concept; and (e) summaries of two books related to a calling or influential figures expected to shape their future lives.

Process Design and Context

This course was conducted by applying Graham Wallace's writing process of "Preparation-Incubation-Illumination-Verification".¹¹ The instructor had students write a "Life Concept" at the beginning of the semester. This was intended to foster a critical awareness early on in preparation for writing a future personal statement. A Life Concept is defined as a cognitive and practical framework through which an individual organizes and interprets life by integrating a consistent value system, goal orientation, and self-identity; it is used to structure the direction and meaning of life. Students were guided to clearly express their life concepts and reflect upon them continuously, which naturally led

to the writing of a future-oriented personal statement as the final assignment.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument consisted of basic demographic items—such as gender, academic year, age, and major—as well as five primary categories designed to assess participants' experiences with personal statement writing and the psychological changes associated with the activity. In addition, each of the five primary categories included a total of ten supplementary items intended to capture more detailed aspects of participants' responses.

The questionnaire was structured as follows.

Hello,

This survey is conducted to examine the psychological healing effects of personal statement writing among students enrolled in the Writing I course this semester. All responses will be used solely for research purposes, and anonymity will be strictly maintained. You are kindly requested to respond to the following questions as honestly as possible.

Thank you.

I. Demographic Information of Respondents

1. Gender: Male () / Female ()
2. Year in School:
3. Age: () years
4. Major:

II. Experience of Personal Statement Writing and Psychological Changes

1. Prior to taking this course, have you had any experience writing a personal statement?

- ① Yes ② No

1-1. (If you answered "Yes") When did you write a personal statement?

- ① During middle school ② During high school ③ In another course after entering university ④ Other ()

1-2. To what extent did your previous experience of writing a personal statement contribute to your personal growth?

- ① Very helpful ② Somewhat helpful ③ Neutral ④ Slightly unhelpful ⑤ Not at all helpful

2. To what extent do you consider personal statement writing to be necessary for personal growth?

- ① Very necessary ② Somewhat necessary ③ Neutral ④ Slightly unnecessary ⑤ Not at all necessary

3. Do you think your personal statement writing skills have improved through this semester's Writing course?

- ① Strongly agree ② Somewhat agree ③ Neutral ④ Somewhat disagree ⑤ Strongly disagree

4. The personal statement writing activity conducted in this course focuses on a future time frame of 5 to 10 years rather than the present. What do you consider to be necessary in order to introduce yourself 5 to 10 years into the future? (Select up to two)

- ① Life concept ② Personal strengths ③ Understanding of the workplace ④ Job-related skills ⑤ Other

4-1. (If you selected "Other") Please specify what is necessary to introduce yourself 5–10 years into the future.

5. Did you experience any changes in your psychological state before and after writing the personal statement?

- ① Yes ② No

Please respond to the following items only if you experienced changes in your psychological state.

What kinds of changes did you experience?

5-1. My self-confidence has improved.

- ① Strongly agree ② Somewhat agree ③ Neutral ④ Somewhat disagree ⑤ Strongly disagree

5-2. My motivation for personal growth has been strengthened.

- ① Strongly agree ② Somewhat agree ③ Neutral ④ Somewhat disagree ⑤ Strongly disagree

5-3. My feelings of depression have decreased.

- ① Strongly agree ② Somewhat agree ③ Neutral ④ Somewhat disagree ⑤ Strongly disagree

5-4. My anxiety about the future has decreased.

- ① Strongly agree ② Somewhat agree ③ Neutral ④ Somewhat disagree ⑤ Strongly disagree

5-5. My stress related to employment has decreased.

- ① Strongly agree ② Somewhat agree ③ Neutral ④ Somewhat disagree ⑤ Strongly disagree

5-6. If you experienced any other psychological changes, please specify.

5-7. What do you think are the reasons for these changes? (Open-ended)

Data Collection

The submission period for the "personal statement set 5–10 years in the future" assignment was from December 1 to December 13, 2025. The survey was conducted over a seven-day period, from December 15 to December 22, following the submission of the assignment. A total of 45 students were invited to participate in the survey via Google Forms, and responses were obtained from 41 participants.

The survey was conducted via Google Forms after the end of the semester following the announcement of grade evaluations to ensure students' voluntary participation, autonomy, and objectivity.

Although the pre-test survey could not directly control for participants' existing experiences, the study was designed to provide neutral guidance to avoid inducing specific attitudes during the task and to focus on the experience of self-reflection itself. Nevertheless, a limitation is presented in this study is the possibility that some participants already held a positive perception of personal statements, which may have influenced the research results.

RESULTS

Participants' Demographic Characteristics

1) Gender: Male (n=19), Female (n=22)

2) Academic Year: First-year (n=24), Second-year (n=3), Third-year (n=7), Fourth-year (n=7)

3) Age: 19 (n=1), 20 (n=17), 21 (n=4), 22 (n=2), 23 (n=6), 24 (n=2), 25 (n=2), 26 (n=2), 27 (n=2), 31 (n=1), 47 (n=1)

4) Major: Theology (n=20), Church Music (n=7), Social Welfare (n=6), Addiction Counseling (n=5), Child Studies (n=3)

The gender distribution of respondents was relatively balanced, with females accounting for 53.7% and males for 46.3%.

In terms of academic year, first-year students constituted the largest proportion at 58.5%, while third-year and fourth-year students each accounted for 17.1%. Second-year students represented the smallest group at 7.3%.

Participants' ages ranged from 19 to 47 years. The most represented age was 20 (41.4%), followed by 23 (14.6%) and 21 (9.8%). Ages 22, 24, 25, 26, and 27 each accounted for 4.9%, while ages 19, 31, and 47 were each represented by a single respondent (2.4%).

Regarding academic major, Theology accounted for the largest proportion at 48.8%, followed by Church Music (16.8%), Social Welfare (14.4%), Addiction Counseling (12.0%), and Child Studies (7.2%).

Overall, these demographic characteristics suggest that the participants in this course reflect a distribution broadly representative of the university's student population. Notably, more than 65% of the respondents were enrolled in Christian-related majors, such as Theology and Church Music, providing a meaningful context for examining how students engaged in church or Christian organizations envision their future selves.

Experience with Personal Statement Writing and Psychological Changes

1) Prior experience with personal statement writing

Participants were asked whether they had prior experience writing a personal statement before taking this course. Among the 41 respondents, 73.2% (n=30) reported having such experience, while 26.8% (n=11) indicated that they had not.

Respondents who answered "yes" were further asked to specify when they had written a personal statement. The results are as follows:

1-1) If yes: When did you write a personal statement?

The majority of respondents (63.3%, n=19) indicated that they had written a personal statement during high school, while 20.0% (n=6) reported having written one in another course after entering university.

In addition, a small number of respondents (each n=1, 3.3%) reported writing personal statements in the following contexts: during middle school; continuously from middle school through university for scholarship applications; when applying for ministry-related positions; when applying for social welfare field practice; and when applying for government-funded scholarships.

Among respondents with prior experience, 63.3% reported that they had written personal statements during high school, likely as part of the college admission process. Meanwhile, 20.0% indicated that they had written personal statements in other university courses, suggesting that such writing tasks are not confined to a single subject within higher education. Additionally, some respondents reported experiences dating back to middle school, as well as in contexts such as internships, scholarship applications, and job-seeking activities. These findings indicate that personal statement writing functions as a commonly required and essential task across a range of application and selection processes.

1-2) Perceived impact of prior personal statement writing on personal growth

Participants were asked whether their previous experience with personal statement writing had contributed to their personal growth. The results indicated that 46.3% (n=19) responded "very helpful," while 24.3% (n=10) responded "somewhat helpful," and another 24.3% (n=10) selected "neutral." A small proportion, 4.9% (n=2), reported that it was "rarely helpful," and no respondents indicated that it was "not helpful at all."

When combining the responses "very helpful" and "somewhat helpful," a total of 70.7% of participants perceived prior personal statement writing experiences as beneficial to their personal growth. This suggests that a majority of respondents recognize writing experiences as contributing positively to their developmental process.

2) Perceived necessity of personal statement writing for self-development

Participants were also asked to evaluate the necessity of personal statement writing for their personal growth. Among the 41 respondents, 58.5% (n=24) indicated that it was "very necessary," while 41.5% (n=17) responded that it was "somewhat necessary." No participants selected neutral or negative options.

These findings indicate that all respondents acknowledged the importance of personal statement writing as a meaningful tool for self-development.

3) Perceived improvement in personal statement writing skills through the course

Participants were further asked whether their personal statement writing skills had improved through the writing course. Among the 39 respondents, 71.8% (n=28) responded "strongly agree," while 28.2% (n=11) selected "somewhat agree." No respondents reported neutral or negative evaluations.

These results suggest that the writing course had a positive impact not only on students' personal growth but also on the development of their practical writing competencies.

4) Key components required for writing a future-oriented personal statement

Participants were asked to identify up to two key elements they considered necessary for introducing themselves from a future perspective (5–10 years ahead). The responses were as follows: life concept (56.1%, n=23), personal strengths (53.7%, n=22), understanding of the workplace (41.5%, n=17), and job-related skills (17.1%, n=7). One respondent (2.4%) selected "other."

The "other" responses included: personal goals; becoming a conductor of a regional missionary choir; vision and direction, along with information about the desired workplace and its ideal candidate profile, as well as life-stage goals; and having an unwavering and clear conviction.

Among the listed components, "life concept" emerged as the most essential element for self-introduction in future-oriented personal statement writing. The finding that learners identified the life concept as the most critical component suggests a positive recognition of the importance of self-identity, personal values, and life direction. Following this, personal strengths and understanding of the workplace were identified as important elements. These results indicate that respondents perceive self-understanding as a prerequisite, followed by an understanding of the professional context in which they will eventually operate.

5) Changes in psychological state before and after the personal statement writing activity

Participants were asked whether they experienced any changes in their psychological state before and after engaging in the personal statement writing activity. The results indicated that 90.2% (n=37) of respondents reported experiencing psychological changes, whereas 9.8% (n=4) indicated no noticeable change.

A binomial test was conducted to examine whether the proportion of participants reporting psychological changes significantly differed from a null probability of 0.50. The results revealed that a significantly greater proportion of participants reported experiencing psychological changes compared to those who did not ($p < .001$).

To further examine the nature of these psychological changes, five sub-items (Items 5-1 to 5-5) were analyzed. Each item was measured using a five-point Likert scale, with higher scores indicating greater perceived positive change.

Descriptive statistics, including means and standard deviations, were calculated for each item. In addition, one-sample t-tests were conducted to determine whether the mean scores for each item significantly differed from the neutral midpoint of the scale (i.e., 3).

The results indicated that all five sub-items showed mean values above the neutral level, suggesting a general tendency toward positive psychological change following the writing activity. Furthermore, the t-test results demonstrated that these differences were statistically significant, supporting the robustness of the observed effects.

Slight variations in the number of respondents were observed across individual items due to differences in response completion.

5-1) Increased self-confidence (n=40)

Participants were asked whether their self-confidence had improved following the writing activity. The results indicated that 37.5% (n=15) responded “strongly agree,” while 55.0% (n=22) selected “somewhat agree.” A small proportion of respondents reported “neutral” (5.0%, n=2) or “somewhat disagree” (2.5%, n=1), and no participants selected “strongly disagree.”

Overall, 92.5% of respondents indicated a positive increase in self-confidence. The mean score for this item was above the neutral midpoint of the scale, indicating a general tendency toward increased self-confidence.

5-2) Strengthening of motivation for self-growth (n=40)

Participants were also asked whether their motivation for self-growth had been strengthened following the writing activity. The results showed that 55.0% (n=22) responded “strongly agree,” while 42.5% (n=17) indicated “somewhat agree.” Only 2.5% (n=1) selected “neutral,” and no respondents reported negative responses.

In total, 97.5% of participants reported a positive change in motivation for self-growth. The mean score for this item was above the neutral midpoint of the scale, indicating a general tendency toward enhanced motivation for personal development.

5-3) Reduction in depressive feelings (n=39)

Participants were asked whether their feelings of depression had decreased following the writing activity. The results indicated that 30.8% (n=12) responded “strongly agree,” and 41.0% (n=16) selected “somewhat agree.” Meanwhile, 25.6% (n=10) reported “neutral,” and a small proportion (2.6%, n=1) indicated “somewhat disagree,” with no respondents selecting “strongly disagree.”

Overall, 71.8% of participants reported a reduction in depressive feelings. The mean score for this item was above the neutral midpoint of the scale, indicating a general tendency toward decreased depressive feelings.

5-4) Reduction in anxiety about the future (n=40)

Participants were asked whether their anxiety about the future had decreased following the writing activity. The results indicated that 35.0% (n=14) responded “strongly agree,” and 27.5% (n=11) indicated “somewhat agree.” An additional 27.5% (n=11) reported “neutral,” while 7.5% (n=3) and 2.5% (n=1) selected “somewhat disagree” and “strongly disagree,” respectively.

In total, 62.5% of respondents reported a decrease in future-related anxiety. The mean score for this item was above the neutral midpoint of the scale, indicating a general tendency toward reduced anxiety about the future.

5-5) Reduction in employment-related anxiety (n=40)

Participants were also asked whether their anxiety related to employment had decreased following the writing activity. The results showed that 25.0% (n=10) responded “strongly agree,” and 35.0% (n=14) selected “somewhat agree,” while 25.0% (n=10) reported “neutral.” A minority of respondents indicated “somewhat disagree” (7.5%, n=3) or “strongly disagree” (7.5%, n=3).

Overall, 60.0% of respondents reported a reduction in employment-related anxiety. The mean score for this item was above the neutral midpoint of the scale, indicating a general tendency toward decreased employment-related anxiety. The results are summarized in Table 1.

Descriptive statistics indicated that all sub-items had mean scores above the neutral midpoint (3). Specifically, self-confidence showed a mean of 4.28 (SD = 0.68), and motivation for self-growth showed the highest mean of 4.53 (SD = 0.55).

Reductions in negative emotional states were also observed, with depressive feelings (M = 4.00, SD = 0.83), anxiety about the future (M = 3.85, SD = 1.08), and employment-related anxiety (M = 3.63, SD = 1.17).

These results indicate a consistent tendency toward positive psychological change following the writing activity.

5-6) Other psychological changes (open-ended responses)

Participants were invited to report any additional psychological changes not captured by the predefined items. The responses indicated a range of experiences, including increased motivation in life, a sense of gratitude when reflecting on one’s life, difficulties stemming from incomplete self-understanding, and feelings of stability and enthusiasm derived from more concretely envisioning one’s future.

Overall, participants reported gaining greater motivation toward life, experiencing psychological composure through gratitude, and developing positive emotional states such as stability and enthusiasm.

5-7) Perceived reasons for psychological changes (open-ended responses)

To further explore the underlying factors contributing to psychological changes, participants were asked to describe the reasons for these changes. The responses revealed several recurring themes, including opportunities for self-reflection, enhanced self-understanding through writing, confronting previously avoided fears about the future, and the process of concretizing an otherwise vague future. Some participants also highlighted experiencing a psychological “first step” toward action, increased confidence in writing, adopting a more realistic perspective, and viewing themselves from a more objective standpoint.

These findings suggest that the future-oriented personal statement writing activity functioned as a meaningful opportunity for objective self-reflection. Moreover, engaging in the writing task as part of preparing for social and professional entry appears to have facilitated positive psychological changes by encouraging individuals to confront and structure their perceptions of the future.

DISCUSSION

The present study aimed to examine the psychological effects of future-oriented personal statement writing among university students. The findings revealed that a substantial majority

of participants (90.2%) reported experiencing changes in their psychological state following the writing activity, indicating that this intervention may have meaningful psychological implications. The results of this study demonstrate that future-oriented personal statement writing activities have a positive impact on learners' self-awareness and identity formation.

More specifically, the results demonstrated consistent positive trends across all measured dimensions. Notably, self-confidence (92.5%) and motivation for self-growth (97.5%) showed particularly high levels of positive change, suggesting that engaging in future-oriented self-narrative construction may reinforce individuals' sense of agency and developmental orientation.

In addition, reductions were observed in negative emotional states, including depressive feelings (71.8%), anxiety about the future (62.5%), and employment-related anxiety (60.0%). Although these effects were relatively more moderate compared to positive psychological variables, they nonetheless indicate that the writing activity may contribute to alleviating negative affect.

This suggests that beyond the mere improvement of writing skills, objective self-reflection was fostered as learners concretely imagined their future and verbalized it. Furthermore, as these activities are closely linked to career exploration and preparation for entering society, they appear to have contributed to strengthening learners' motivation and fostering a sense of psychological stability. However, since the study was conducted on only two classes, there are limitations to the generalizability of the findings; therefore, further research is needed to verify long-term effects across diverse groups.

These findings can be interpreted through the lens of temporal distancing and prospective cognition. By projecting themselves into a future context, participants may have been able to reinterpret present uncertainties as transitional and manageable, thereby fostering a more adaptive psychological outlook.

Furthermore, the simultaneous increase in positive psychological factors and decrease in negative emotional states suggests that positive psychological change may function as a mediating mechanism in reducing negative affect. This highlights the potential value of writing-based interventions not only as educational tools but also as psychologically supportive practices within higher education contexts.

Table 1. Changes in Psychological State Following the Writing Activity

Variable	n	Mean	SD	Positive (%)
Self-confidence	40	4.28	0.68	92.5
Motivation for self-growth	40	4.53	0.55	97.5
Depressive feelings (↓)	39	4.00	0.83	71.8
Future anxiety (↓)	40	3.85	1.08	62.5
Employment anxiety (↓)	40	3.63	1.17	60.0

CONCLUSION

The findings of this study demonstrate that students enrolled in the "Writing I" course at C University in Seoul during the second semester of 2025 experienced meaningful positive psychological changes through engagement in future-oriented personal statement writing set 5–10 years ahead. Under the entrance exam-oriented Korean education system, university freshmen have rushed forward without the opportunity to reflect on their lives. Through the creation of life concepts and future self-introductions, learners are believed to have gained an opportunity to establish a self-identity as "one who is" rather than "one who does." Furthermore, by establishing a temporal distance through the setting of making the future present, they gained a perspective for preparing for the future. This acquisition of a perspective led to positive results, such as increased confidence and reduced anxiety.

These changes were reflected in increased self-confidence and strengthened motivation for self-growth, as well as reductions in negative emotional states, including depression, future-related anxiety, and employment-related anxiety. Collectively, these findings provide indirect yet compelling evidence for the psychological therapeutic potential of future-oriented personal statement writing. Notably, the results suggest that the enhancement of positive psychological states may contribute to the alleviation of negative emotions. However, given that the magnitude of change in depression and anxiety-related variables was relatively moderate, further research employing more refined methodological approaches is warranted.

Future-oriented personal statement writing appears to facilitate temporal distancing, enabling students to adopt a more prospective and structured perspective on their future. Through this process, participants reinterpret their present anxiety and perceived deficiencies as transitional states within an ongoing developmental trajectory, thereby reconstructing a sense of continuity and possibility in their lives.

Future research should further examine the psychological effects of present-oriented personal statement writing and compare them with those of future-oriented writing. Such comparative investigations would help clarify the distinct therapeutic value of future-oriented approaches. Furthermore, these findings have practical implications for the development of writing-based intervention programs that extend beyond instrumental purposes, such as employment preparation, to include applications aimed at psychological healing and well-being.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors have no conflicting financial interests.

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