



HEALING WRITING

BY SUJATA IYENGAR AND ALLISON K. LENHARDT

The word “health” comes from the ancient language of Old High German, where it meant wholeness, the state of not being broken or incomplete. In English, the word has come to mean wholeness of body or mind. But what would this “wholeness” mean? Is health merely the absence of sickness, or is it a positive quality in its own right? If “health” exists on its own, how would you describe it? Is it the act of caring for ourselves as well as for others, or does “health” mean the process of curing or treating disease? Does “the best of health” mean the state of being youthful, athletic, good-looking, confident, intelligent, and sane, or may one enjoy excellent health without possessing all of these qualities? Can we be happy if we have what some would consider mediocre or poor health? How much can we really control about our health? The essays and excerpts in this reader, and the assignments alongside them, will take you through different ways of understanding your own health, the health of the nation, and the health of those who are dear to you.

Schools, workplaces, magazines, newspapers, and digital media surround us with advice on how to be healthy, how to stay in shape, how to stay well, and how to remain sound in mind and body. Sometimes, however, no matter how healthy our habits, we become ill; sometimes our bodies are genetically predisposed to develop a disorder or disease. In addition, when we search for cures or treatment, we might not be able to reconcile the conflicting advice that we encounter. Will yoga exercises relieve post-traumatic stress and uncoil tense or injured muscles, or will they exacerbate existing weaknesses? Is cancer

the inevitable result of a bad card in the genetic lottery, or can we protect ourselves through diet, exercise, alternative medicine, and meditation? How can we evaluate this overwhelming, contradictory mass of information about health?

Working through the readings and assignments in this book will help you to reflect upon our assumptions about what twenty-first-century medicine considers to be a healthy body or mind and what present-day Americans choose as their preferred therapies for disease and illness. The readings encourage you to consider your relationship to traditional medical treatment and healthy bodies in order to help you reevaluate your concepts of health, illness, well-being, and medicine. We include readings that describe health in its standard terms—youth, vigor, beauty, ability—along with essays that expand our notion of what health or well-being might mean. We begin with extracts from Anne Fadiman’s *The Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down*, a thoughtful non-fiction novel about the contrast between the American medical establishment and Hmong shamanism, and its consequences for the health and life of a young girl caught in the middle of the culture-clash, and we conclude with extracts from Shannon Brownlee’s *Overtreated*, which argues (in the words of its subtitle) that American medicine as practiced at this point in the twenty-first century is “making us sicker and poorer.” Our excerpt from psychologist Daniel Gilbert’s *Stumbling on Happiness* re-frames the generally accepted combination of “health and happiness,” as he describes how people who have bodies or lives that most of us would describe as unhealthy or broken return to an inborn set point of happiness. Likewise, Dwight Christopher Gabbard’s reflective essay about the contentment of his severely disabled son encourages us to imagine the experiences and abilities of those in bodies that differ profoundly from what we consider to be “normal” or healthful.

At the same time, those who experience sickness—psychological or physical—need care and support in order to return to well-being or find ways to thrive in a world that prizes physical vigor, independence, and cheerfulness. Etymologically, the Latin word for “care,” or “management,” *cura*, gives us our word “cure.” Some readings, therefore, also examine who or which agents are accountable for care and health, in particular, the extent to which individuals can control their health. Do recent discoveries in neuroscience, genetics, and behavioral health mitigate patients’ responsibility for their health? The research summarized and discussed by David H. Freedman on obesity and by

INTRODUCTION

Drew Pinsky on addiction encourages us to evaluate the complex relationships among individual factors that can contribute towards disease or poor health, such as environmental cues, inherited predispositions, and personal choices. At the same time, the “care” in “healthcare” involves other persons or groups in addition to the patient or health-seeker. To what extent are families, mothers, employers, caretakers, and government officials, among other parties, obliged to care for the health of citizens and residents of the nation-state? Aneurin Bevan’s 1946 speech establishing Britain’s National Health Service provides some historical perspective on a very different medical system from that of twenty-first-century America. Should a health-care system offer citizens the opportunity to achieve good or excellent health or should it restrict itself to healing catastrophic illness? Is good health a right, a benefit, an entitlement, or a privilege? As we write these words, America’s health-care system is in transition. As you work through this reader, we hope that the breadth of our readings will enable you to take an informed position on current debates.

While we were putting together these readings, developing these assignments, and talking to our students, we realized that writing and healing in some ways mirror each other. Readers often describe “good” writing as intelligent, elegant, witty, and beautiful. In some ways, we define “good” writing according to qualities that we also use to describe “healthy” bodies and minds. We talk about “strong” and “weak” drafts or thesis statements, or “fleshing out” an argument. Both good writing and good health, however, are not attributes that are innate or unchanging. While some persons might have better “writing genes,” just as some have genes that predispose them to physical vigor, persuasive, graceful writing often develops through good habits, just as a robust, sound body and mind can flourish through consistent nurturing.

We can also imagine health as a metaphor for the writing process: like your health, writing is not always linear and takes time to improve. Your drafts might suffer setbacks as you struggle to define your argument, but they might also undergo amazing changes, sometimes because of how those earlier setbacks have changed your perspective. You can think of your first draft, or prewrite, as your initial “diagnosis,” where you examine the evidence and record your first reactions to the topic. Your diagnosis could change, however, depending upon what you discovered during the process of researching your topic and further examining your draft. As you continue to add to your draft, you might request the help of other writers such as your instructor or your

HEALTH

peers – who will take on the imaginary roles of surgeon, physical trainer, or therapist– in repairing the awkward places or in reconstructing a paper that began incoherently. Advice from your instructor and your peers can help you “treat” your ailing draft.

Even with their advice, however, you must be the one to perform the surgery, conduct the exercises, or undergo the therapy to heal your draft. As the due date approaches, you might feel that you are performing what nurses call “triage” (the process of evaluating and prioritizing tasks) on your writing, as you race against time to strengthen your claims, evidence, and organization. Ideally, you will have reserved enough time for final edits, so that you spend the days and hours before your due date in making cosmetic changes (editing for style, tone, and diction) rather than dramatic interventions (changing your thesis completely). As you finish your draft, you stitch, or suture, the paper together carefully, editing for style and checking over your work for errors.

Strong writing and healthy papers thrive through consistent care. Just as we might try to maintain our health, well-being, and happiness through our way of life, so we can still nourish and nurture our writing to better health, even after we complete final drafts or finish a composition class. Moreover, we might enjoy better results if we committed our attention to regular habits rather than to briefly-fashionable fads in order to maintain good health and good writing.

Finally, what we discover in the process of writing is much more important than striving to achieve a perfected or completed piece of work. Writing, regardless of its quality, can be a healing process. For some persons, the act of writing is therapy, a way to express emotions and work out problems. But even if you choose a topic distant from your personal experience, or if you do not find the act of writing therapeutic, writing will exercise your mind, as you develop your thoughts about a particular topic by writing about your ideas. We hope that these readings and the assignments will help you develop a healthy and balanced diet of reading and exercises for healing, or enhancing, your writing and that you enjoy them as much as our own students have.

INTRODUCTION



Look for news items and features about health, illness, and wellness in a variety of mass media: magazines (print and digital), newspapers, television programs or channels, websites and podcasts, and your social media networks. Make a list of at least ten headlines that you see. Do any of them offer conflicting advice or information? Do any particular health issues dominate the conversation?



Our student Caroline Baughman inspired our comparison of the writing process to the healing process. How do you imagine your writing process? Is there a particular metaphor that you prefer? Can you extend this metaphor to different aspects of your writing process?



With a group of your classmates, talk about your reading “diet.” What kind of texts and information do you consume, and in what forms? Do you read print books for pleasure or school? Do you watch or listen to broadcast media? Do you spend time on social media? Take a look at the government’s current guidelines on nutrition (<http://www.choosemyplate.gov/>). Draw a “plate” to represent your reading habits. Present your “plates” to the class.