

NYPSI, Course 101: Writing Descriptions of Psychoanalytic Process - I

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**First Year Candidates
January 26 – March 9, 2026**

WRITING EXERCISES

1.) Describe a person (anyone other than yourself!)* in writing

Choose someone with whom you've had at least some direct, face-to-face interaction, including some verbal exchange. The ideal subject for this exercise is a person you've met more than once – or with whom you've had a single, memorable exchange -- but don't know really well. This *may* be the patient about whom you write a brief clinical vignette (see Exercise 2, below) – but it needn't be; you might describe the door attendant in your building; the receptionist at a clinic where you work; a bartender or barista whom you chat with sometimes; a person you met on a train who made a strong impression on you. The purpose in choosing someone you don't know well is to capture your first, strong impressions – to help a reader see (and perhaps hear) this person as you do. As analysts, we're ultimately interested in the mind; but there are clues to inner life in every aspect of a person's appearance, dress, gait, gestures, vocal tone – sometimes even characteristic odors. (Advantage to writing about a non-patient: this might help you to avoid thinking clinically / theoretically. Advantage to writing about the same patient you'll describe in Exercise 2: efficiency. Up to you. If you choose to write about a patient whom you already know well, please stick with your earliest or most abiding impressions – not the stuff of deep inference.) No theoretical terms, please; just plain-English description (think “short story” or “character sketch,” not “case report”). Direct quotation (which may be approximate – okay to take some creative license, here!) may be helpful, especially in describing a person whose language is colorful. **Aim for a single, double-spaced page, to be read aloud in class.**

*** Whomever you choose to describe – in this exercise, or the next (in any writing you do about another person!) -- you may also discover something about yourself, whether you want to or not; that is part of what makes clinical writing scary (and interesting). For this reason it is vitally important that when we meet as a group, we hear each other's work as we would wish to have *our* work heard: sympathetically, and with intention to help us develop as both writers and clinicians.**

2.) Write a brief clinical vignette

Please draft a written description of any clinical moment of interest to you. The moment you describe may have captured your interest for any number of reasons, including (but not limited to) these:

- It is characteristic of your work with this patient, and will help others to understand your experience and why you respond as you do.
- It is unprecedented in your work with this patient, and you don't understand it; you are writing in hope that others will help you to get a handle on what's happening.
- Your patient has said or done something so intriguing (or moving, or funny, or maddening, etc.) that you wish you could tell others about it.
- *You* have said or done something that you'd like for colleagues to know you've said or done.
- You have said or done something that you *do not want* your colleagues to know you've said or done – and you hope that sharing the moment with others will reassure you, or perhaps help you to regain your footing.

Somewhere in your vignette – possibly at the very beginning, but wherever it fits most naturally – be sure to include the kind of rich, sensory description you practiced in the first writing exercise. It's also important that your description include something of your participation in the moment you've chosen, whatever its form(s): a decision to remain silent; a verbal response; a nonverbal (e.g., facial, gestural, tonal) response. Whatever you actually say and/or do, readers will want to know what you were thinking – *and feeling* – so please tell us something about that, too. Try to capture the moment as vividly as possible, to allow readers to feel as if they were there. Bits of dialogue -- with enough context to clarify their meaning -- can be effective; so can specific visual images, which may arise from the patient's words or from your own associations to them. Close observation of bodily experience – again, both the patient's and yours – can help to communicate internal states, so you may want to record shifts in posture, facial expression, vocal timbre, etc.

For presentation in class, your description should be about two to four pages (double-spaced) in length; if you find that you have more to say, don't stop writing – but do identify a two-to-four page excerpt to read aloud. Please keep in mind that writing is an iterative process, and the aim of this exercise is to provide you with the kernel of a first draft of a consultation summary; or a complete case report; or perhaps an illustrative vignette in a theoretical paper. The moment you describe need not come from a psychoanalytic case. For the purpose of this exercise, it's fine to write about a psychotherapy patient or about a person consulting you for possible treatment; in fact, you may find it helpful to sharpen your initial observations by writing about a patient who is new to you.

3.) Begin drafting a longer clinical narrative

To acquaint yourself with structure and uses of a comprehensive clinical narrative (consultation report, annual summary, treatment summary), please consult **Elements of a Clinical Report**.

Though you and your supervisor bear ultimate responsibility for your work with a patient and for the report in which you describe that work, you'll also gather -- from your classmates and from me -- a variety of perspectives on the material you present. Class meetings will proceed in workshop form, with two or three candidates reading aloud from their work each time. When we discuss your work in class, we'll think together about how to ensure that your writing captures -- and sometimes extends -- your understanding of the patient. I'll provide written comments outside class time, as well. The writing / sharing / editing cycle goes like this: draft; present; gather comments; revise and extend; repeat. You'll learn the value of drafting freely at first, secure in the knowledge that you can edit, later.