

# James Pennebaker

## 'Real things are just endlessly fascinating'

Our editor Jon Sutton poses the questions, on expressive writing, humour in teaching and more

**I was hugely impressed in your talk just now with the walk through science that you took, and how multidisciplinary and multi-method your approach has been. What are the roots of that approach, in terms of the psychologists and theories that inspired you when you began that journey?**

I started the way that I've approached life, from the very beginning, from right out in the backyard, growing up and trying to figure out what's the best way to kill ants! Trying to understand how to catch fish, or doing chemistry experiments. This mixture of just playing and then trying to understand, and then coming up with a model of how it must be working, and then testing that out. So it's not something that was unique to me in terms of psychology, it was something that I've just always done.

**A very practical focus on life, that has led you to the advice that you gave to a student – 'Go and study real things'.**

That's exactly right. Because, you know, real things are just endlessly fascinating. In much of my early career, any time there was a big disaster, I was at the door to study it. A large group of people all dealing with something new – just watching how people do it tells you about the event, it tells you about people, it tells you about the context. I guess I've been saying the same thing over and over again, going back and forth between trying to understand, and also just discover.

**Looking at disasters, that led you to study 9/11, and the aftermath.**

When 9/11 occurred, because I'd studied so many others – I'd studied an earthquake and I'd studied shootings, and all sorts of things – when that happened, I knew exactly what to do, because I'd done so many of these things that I could jump right in.

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**James Pennebaker will be a keynote speaker at the Society's 2017 Annual Conference**

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**By way of giving a bit of an intro to people who don't know about you, say you were to analyse a corpus of my written words, what would you expect to be able to determine? By the way, I used your Twitter tool, apparently my feed is that of a 'worried, spacey Valley Girl'...**

Then I'd be a little concerned about the way you're writing!

**Many people are...**

In terms of your general writing, if I analysed your email, I could do a pretty good job of telling how socially connected you are, how smart you are, how analytic you are, how self-aware you are, how personal, how depression-prone, how honest... With all of these, I would do better than chance, and I'd do better probably than someone who read your emails. It wouldn't be perfect, and that's the important issue, this gets to trying to understand the real world.

**Would you do better than people who talk to me, for example, or is it just that with the written word you can do it so quickly?**

That's it, I can do it so quickly. And it's kind of like if you ask all your friends about you, they're going to come away with slight variations in terms of who you are, because you behave differently around each one. The beauty of the emails is that they can pick up each one. What information do you change when you're talking from one person to the next?

**Has technology in that way been a godsend to you?**

The work of course could not have been done 30 years ago, it's just so costly... to go through and count words on that page and find out which dimension each word is, would take somebody half a day, and would take me 1/100th of a second.

**At the same time, in terms of interventions, does it in some ways make the opportunities for expressive writing interventions more narrow, because people are so emotionally expressive in a variety of online forums?**

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That's a very interesting question. I do think there's been a cultural shift, that people are more open nowadays than they were when I started this research.

**Maybe too open? It gets annoying on social media. Other languages have a word for people who, when you ask them how you are, they tell you. People don't necessarily like the emotionally expressive.**

That's exactly right. I think there has been a cultural shift. I used to think that people being expressive online would not be as healthy as writing for yourself; there's a study done by a group in Israel that shows that expressive writing through social media is as healthy as writing for yourself that surprised me.

**How much do you need to write, to experience the benefits of emotionally expressive writing?**

I don't think people need to do expressive writing very often. I view it as kind of a life course correction. I look at myself; I will do expressive writing myself now maybe once or twice a year, and I'll do it and will sit down and write, I'll get up in the middle of the night, tossing and turning about my current job, and I can't sleep, and I'll get up and write for about 20 or 30 minutes and that's that. So maybe when you're younger, a little more, things are more chaotic.

**Is it important to write when things are going well?**

I'd say no. My attitude is: Why? Because if things are going well, you should enjoy them. Don't analyse them; just enjoy them.

**That's interesting. That might be why a lot of people stop writing diaries after the teenage years, because they're dealing with all of that complexity and uncertainty, and I did this myself through to my teenage years, and realised that the entries were getting – 'everything's kind of all right, no point doing this'.**

That's exactly right.

**When people do write about traumatic events, in the course of your research, how do you deal with that ethically? If things are revealed that maybe haven't been revealed in other ways?**

I've dealt with this in all sorts of ways. What I do is I tell people beforehand that if you talk about anything that could signal to me that you're a danger to yourself or others, I have to act on that. And hardly ever does that happen, but if it does, I contact them first and then afterwards I'll contact authorities if necessary. I can't remember when that's been necessary.

In other studies I'll say, some studies we won't link to names with their writing so I can't identify them. In others, I tell people, 'I will not read what you're writing', so I'll do

this in our Introductory Psychology class, I'll say, 'There are 1500 people in this class, I will not read what you've written'.

**Because it's just fed into the computer.**

Yes. So if you're trying to get some kind of support, or cry for help, do it directly.

**What about the ethics in terms of the use of your methods? Clearly there's applications that we're talking about, working for Microsoft, so you're clearly comfortable with the more commercial applications of your methods. 'With great power comes great responsibility', is that something you feel aware of?**

So here's the issue: I've created a computer program that any dope can do on their own, so if other people are going to do it, so be it. In terms of my own computer program, and I have a commercial wing of my life, so there's a company that uses it. It's not as though this is an intervention, it's more, just, it's a thermometer, it's like selling a thermometer, if you make meth with a thermometer, that's just life in the fast lane.

**So it's a tool that's used to pick up things that are already out there.**

That's right. I should say – the kind of stuff I'm doing is creepy. I mean – it is creepy, how much we can learn about people from their word use. But we can say the same thing with body language, or cameras, or whatever.

**You're an HBO series waiting to happen, a kind of *Lie to Me!* Do you think that's only not happened because words don't lend themselves to the visual? You'd have to have words flying around on the screen...**

I'd like to just move now to your approach to teaching, because that's something that's come more to the fore recently.

It has.

**Explain to me how your approach to teaching differs from what's out there.**

Well, it's become much more technology-heavy. We're doing a big online class, and Sam Gosling and I have been teaching that now for ten years together, and about four years ago we began to switch to online. The Intro Psych class TV show, we broadcast it out to 1500–2000 people. It's a live broadcast TV show. We have a quiz at the beginning of every class. At every class, we break the class into small groups so they can work together, we have surveys and give people immediate feedback, so there's constant feedback, constant connection between the students and us. There's kind of an irony – students feel more connected to us in a class of 1500, than if we taught a class to a 100.

**Why is that?**

Because we're immediate. Our faces are *this* big, when you're watching this, and it's the immediacy that you get from watching a late-night talk show, you get to know that person actually pretty well. This happened

with my wife, she was at a play in New York, and the person who sat down next to her was Stephen Colbert, and this issue the entire time is that my wife feels like she knows him. They ended up talking, and he has this all the time, that people feel that they're really connected. And that's how my students are with Sam and me.

**It's parasocial attachment, isn't it?**

Yeah, it is. It's really quite striking. When we walk around campus and students go, 'Oh my God, Dr Pennebaker!' You know, you see them and they're all flushed and getting really excited and they want to take pictures with me.

**You seem very approachable.**

But here's the point – I used to teach the class live to 500 and never did that ever happen.

**Maybe that's partly the selfie generation.**

I think it's the online, it's just so different.

**You're a funny guy, as well... Do you think it's important to use wit when you're teaching?**

You know, teaching is a mixture of entertainment and information. Anybody who denies that is not a good teacher. If you can't hold a person's attention; you're not successful.

**How does that work in practice? Is it jokes, or more a general approach to the material, the examples you use?**

This gets at the nature of the narrative of stories. Look at you, you're professional, you write, if you write dry text, no one will get past the third sentence. And you know that. And so what you do is the same thing as I do, you personalise it, you humanise the person, you use every sleazy trick in the book to keep people on the page.

**At the moment we're doing a redesign of the magazine, due to launch in January, which may well end up containing this interview now, because part of that is around changing in a way that makes in particular our articles more engaging. As part of that we're thinking about what the writing style is; what is it that we're looking for from our mainly academic contributors? It feels to me that the time is right to capitalise, there's changing climate with academics understanding the need to write in a more engaging and personalised way, not just a big long list of academic references.**

You also have to start using more YouTube videos.

**If we had the resources!**

You don't need many resources. You can have a two-minute snippet of a person telling a story, or who knows. But there are so many ways, if you don't do it, you're going to get screwed.

**We might have to do that. It's linking in with your research, your approach to teaching, it's all about that narrative. Have you applied that approach and those findings in your own life? Do you keep diaries?**

I write occasionally. I don't write very often.

**And you're married to a writer.**

Exactly. In terms of self-reflective writing, I do it sometimes, but not very often. I do it when it's needed; when there's stress or conflict in my life. All the data show that the younger you are, the more stress and conflict you have, and the older you get, you've been through it all, or more and more of it. When you're young and horny, it leads you to really stupid things, you just can't control yourself. That's the definition of youth. And when that happens, that's when writing is really beneficial.

**Tell me about the importance of the 'function words'. I think it's fascinating that you've picked up on something that comprised 70 per cent of everyday speech, but until you went into that, it was mostly ignored as unimportant.**

That's right. It's the difference between content and style.

It's a little bit like watching two people, like those three people there, you could ask 'Where are they going? Are they going a particular route?'. But you can also watch how they're walking, you can get a sense of what their relationship is, their social class, all these other things, all these stylistic variables that are telling us about their psychological state, their social relationships, and that's kind of what function words are doing. So they're

not telling us what they're talking about, but they're telling us how you're thinking, and how you're connecting.

**From what I've seen of your own language use, the Pennebaker Inventory of Limbic Languidness, take the PILL online, you're using language to form acronyms that are a little bit witty.**

I should tell you that I used to get shit because I'd invent clever names like that, and that's why I call my computer program that – I wanted to sound so obscure and complex. Linguistic Inquiry Word Count – what could be more boring and academically appropriate?

I'm known for being a little bit cute and flip. So I wanted this to be scientifically respectable.

**Choose your moments to be cute and flip.**

Exactly.

**Your wife Ruth has published a book called *Pucker Up – The Subversive Woman's Guide to Aging with Wit, Wine, Drama, Humour, Perspective and the Occasional Good Cry*. Do you see yourself as a subversive man, ageing alongside her in the same fashion?**

Of course. That's one reason I think we've always been attracted to each other, because we're both subversive.

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