

## A Simple Writing Exercise That Could Help You Perform More Confidently

### Description

There are lots and lots of stories on the internet (and in books too, of course) about athletes' use of visualization when preparing for competition. Where they [imagine every detail of an upcoming race](#), or [see themselves scoring goals](#), or [overcoming adversity to win a gold medal](#).

Typically, this visualization is all *future*-focused. Where they imagine performing well in upcoming events that haven't yet happened.

But I've also heard stories of athletes who spend time visualizing the *past*. Imagining and virtually re-experiencing *previous* competition successes in their mind to get into a better headspace and boost their confidence at key moments before (or even during) competition.

This seems like a sensible strategy, and anecdotally, this seems to have a positive effect. But is this type of retrospective imagery worth making time for? Like, is there any research suggesting that this does indeed have a measurable effect on performance?

Well, as I began looking, I stumbled across a related study that caught my interest. It didn't look at visualizing past *successes* per se, but past experiences when we had some degree of *power*, and how this might affect how we come across in evaluative situations like job interviews.

Err...power? What does that mean exactly?

Let's take a look...

### Positive aspects of feeling powerful?

Previous research has found that feeling a greater sense of power can increase our sense of control ([Fast et al., 2009](#)) and confidence ([Fast et al., 2011](#)). And perhaps even reduce our stress response ([Carney et al., 2013](#)).

So an international team of researchers ([Lammers et al., 2013](#)) wondered if an exercise designed to "prime" feelings of power, by reminding people of a time when they felt powerful, might give them an edge in performance situations where people generally feel *powerless*.

Specifically, job interviews.

They explain that interviews are a pretty classic scenario in which many experience feelings of powerlessness and insecurity, because we are presented with something that we really want, but are

totally dependent on someone in a higher position of power to give us that thing.

## “Priming” feelings of power and powerlessness

So, to test this out, they recruited 55 undergraduate students to sit for a 15-min mock interview for admission to business school.

Before the interview, all participants completed a pre-interview questionnaire.

For about a third of participants, the next step was to go through a mock interview with two expert interviewers (i.e. professors), whom they needed to convince that they had the “motivation, skills, and experience” to be successful at that school (**control group**).

For the remaining two-thirds of participants, the questionnaire included a short writing exercise that they were led to believe would be used to assess their handwriting. In reality, of course, this was a “power prime” – a way to get them to remember a time when they felt more (or less) powerful.

The exercise wasn’t very long or involved. One group was simply asked to write about a past experience in which they had power. Like a time when they were in a position of evaluating someone else’s performance, or had some control over another person’s ability to get something they wanted (**high-power group**).

The other group, on the other hand, was asked to write about a past experience in which they *lacked* power. Like a time in which they were being evaluated by someone else, and that person had control over whether they got what they wanted or not (**low-power group**).

## Yes or no?

After the interview was over, the interviewers were asked if, based on that interview, they would accept the applicant into their school or not. They were also asked to rate the applicant’s persuasiveness.

So was there any difference in how the participants came across to the interviewers?

## “Acceptance” rates

There absolutely was!

The interviewers said they would have admitted 47.1% of those in the control group. But those who did the high-power writing exercise had an “admit rate” of **68.4%**. While those who did the low-power exercise had a measly admit rate of **26.3%**.

In other words, priming a more powerful mental and emotional state by recalling a time in which they were in a position of power, increased their odds of a successful mock interview by **81%**, relative to doing

nothing at all. And by **162%** relative to recalling a time when they had very little power.

And what was it about power priming that seemed to be so helpful?

Well, the interviewers tended to rate the high-power participants as being more persuasive than those in the control group. While the low-power participants were rated as being *less* persuasive than those in the control. So ultimately, the priming did seem to change how the participants came across in the interview, and made a substantially different impression on the interviewers.

So how might we apply this to our own lives, and music performance, in particular?

## Caveats

Well, before we explore that question, it's important to note that the power primes used in this study were not explicit. Meaning, the participants didn't know that the point of the writing exercise was to remind them of times when they felt more powerful, and thereby cue up that sort of mental or emotional state. So it is possible that the effect of this exercise could have been different, if the participants were more aware of the purpose of the exercise.

That said, the researchers also shared the story of Harvard professor Francesca Gino in their paper. They explain that Gino gave a number of talks and interviewed at a number of prestigious universities in 2007 and 2008 – but received no job offers.

So she tweaked her preparation for these job “auditions.” And before visiting each campus and giving her talk, she began taking some time to reflect on and write about a previous experience when she had power.

And then in 2009, her luck suddenly seemed to change, with offers from Harvard, Wharton, Berkeley, and NYU.

## Takeaways

It can be difficult to stay in a positive headspace in the hours and days leading up to situations in which we know we will be evaluated. Like juries, competitions, auditions, and interviews as well.

Some folks like to watch inspirational movies the night before. Or go for a walk. Or visit a museum. Or do some yoga the morning of. Read, chat with friends, listen to music, doodle, color in coloring books, visualize the upcoming performance, or just sit and study the score.

These are all great, but regardless of whatever else you include in your routine, try setting aside sometime to reflect on and write a few sentences about a time when you felt powerful, before heading over to the hall for your next audition. Or in the green room, before it's time to go on stage for your recital. Or perhaps even at your kitchen table, before you walk into the living room and turn on the camera to record your audition tape.

And if you can't think of a time when you felt powerful, perhaps even just a time when you felt confident and capable would do. Like recalling a performance that went really well, or a time when you had a great lesson and your teacher had nothing to say.

During high-stress situations like auditions or interviews, it's probably more natural for us to have our thoughts flooded by memories of times when we felt powerless and insecure, rather than times when we felt powerful or confident. But based on today's study at least, it would seem that the ability to push negative, low-power memories out of our mind, and replace them with more positive high-power moments from our past is a skill worth cultivating.

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## References

Lammers, J., Dubois, D., Rucker, D. D., & Galinsky, A. D. (2013). Power gets the job: Priming power improves interview outcomes. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology, 49*(4), 776–779.

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jesp.2013.02.008>

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