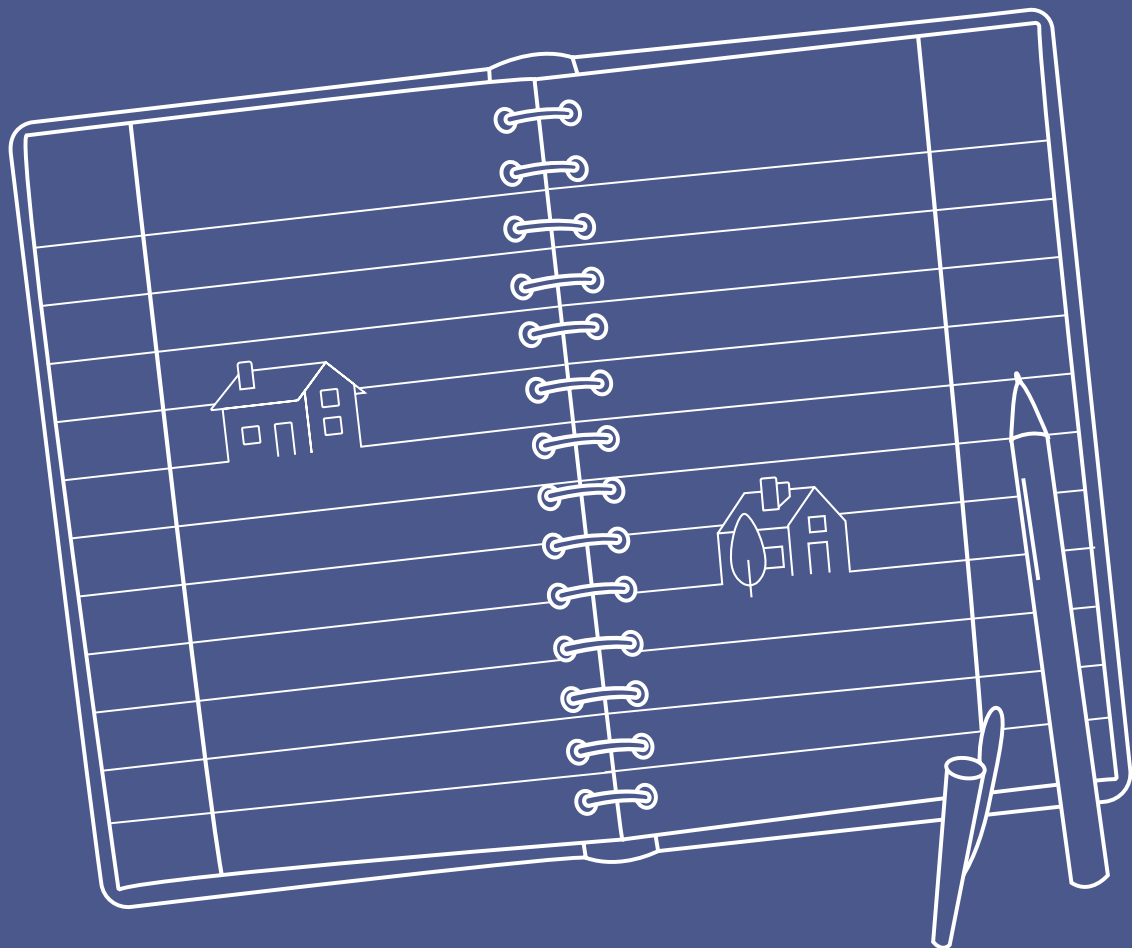




Beyond Covid-19

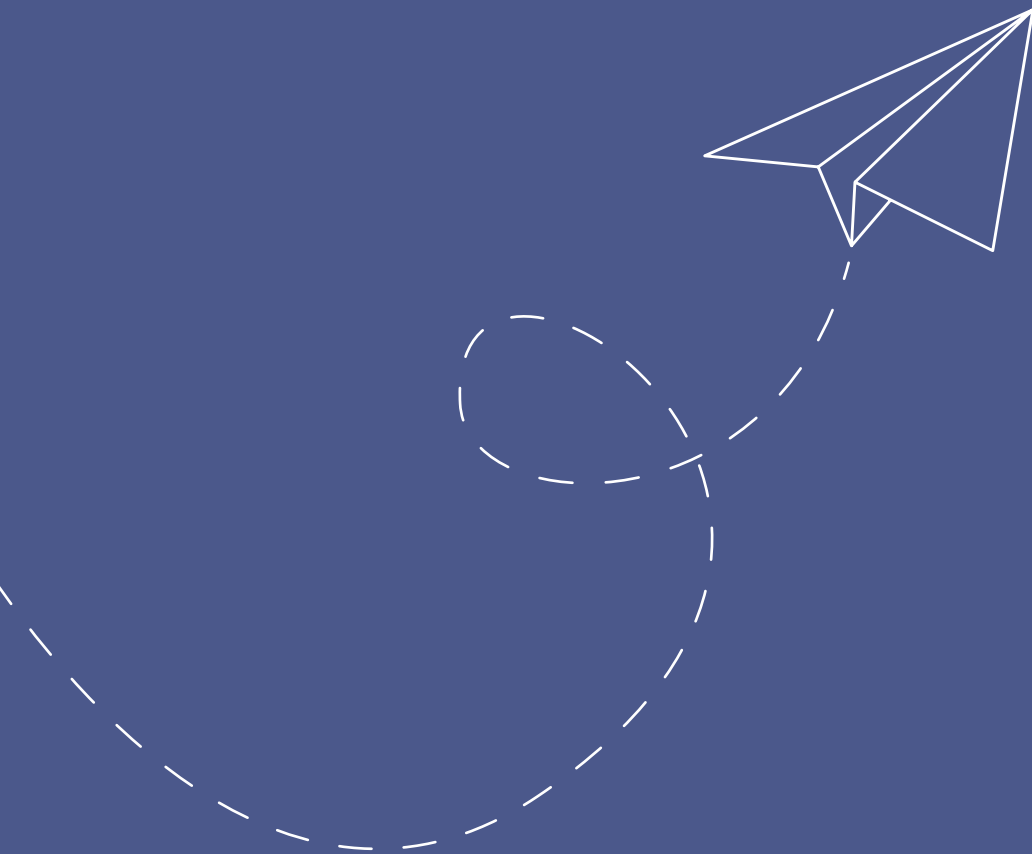
The Writer's Cycle as a Model for Resilience, Transformation and Inclusion

Bambo Soyinka and Isabelle Thompson
with Lucy Sweetman and Joanna Nissel



Introduction

This discussion paper draws from The Writer's Cycle and explores some of the ways in which Covid-19 has disrupted a writer's process. It discusses the impacts of the recent lockdown on writers and writing, and explores how writers will be affected as lockdown eases. In particular, it anticipates, and seeks to suggest ways to mitigate, effects on writers who might have deeper, longer-term experiences of isolation, or who might be especially vulnerable to the virus or its socio-economic repercussions.



Research Methodology & Context

The Writer's Cycle is an evidence-based guide to how writers start and sustain their writing practice. It looks at four broad themes: Discovery, Connection, Craft and Transformation. The Writer's Cycle was developed by the creative writing incubator Paper Nations as part of an action research project. Paper Nations is based in the TRACE research centre at Bath Spa University. Led by Professor Bambo Soyinka, The Writer's Cycle was one of four research projects produced by Paper Nations.

In 2018, in collaboration with the National Association of Writers in Education (NAWE), Paper Nations ran a Call for Evidence to teachers, writers, poets, authors and workshop leaders, asking them to tell us their views and experiences of creative writing education. This was done to help us understand more about what people value, what they need and what they think is missing from the current system of Writing Education. The responses enabled Paper Nations, NAWE and our other partners to develop and share a set of evidence-based resources that help educators build, enhance and sustain creative writing in schools and communities.

The Writer's Cycle highlights transformative implications of the writing life-cycle. The underlying model (as verified in an independent report from the Centre for Youth Education/LKMco) has been shown to enhance feelings of connection, and to increase confidence and frequency in writing, especially for people who initially struggle to write.

Spurred on by these findings, Paper Nations has continued with further research into cultural factors informing creative writing practice and, more recently, we have begun to explore potential uses of The Writer's Cycle as a model for Resilience, Transformation and Inclusion.

Discovery

The Discovery theme emphasises the importance of time, space, journaling and freewriting. In this theme, writers discover themselves and their writing through exploration.

On one level, it may seem as if the lockdown resulting from the pandemic provided writers with the perfect opportunity to spend time writing in isolation, free from the usual pressures of everyday life. However, writers may have found their writing routines disrupted, especially if they had extra responsibilities as a result of the pandemic.

Writers who were already isolated due to, for example, disability or a health condition may have found themselves even more isolated than before. Those on low incomes were and still are particularly hard hit by blows to their usual sources of work. Writers may not have been able to access the resources they needed, such as libraries or public spaces in which to write. The anxieties still inherent in our current situation may make it harder for some writers to give themselves permission to take time to enjoy, explore and discover their writing. Some might doubt their ability or even the power of writing itself to address the issues we face.

For the very youngest of writers, school can provide an environment in which to explore, experiment and discover writing for the very first time. Recent school closures have taken this vital space away from many children.

As we emerge from the strictest phases of lockdown, it is important to note that the barriers to Discovery have not been lifted. With no vaccine and no cure, Covid-19 still represents a very real threat. The social divides it has highlighted in our society have left many grappling with emotional and existential questions. Although pubs are opening and football is returning, many cultural venues, such as theatres, remain closed.

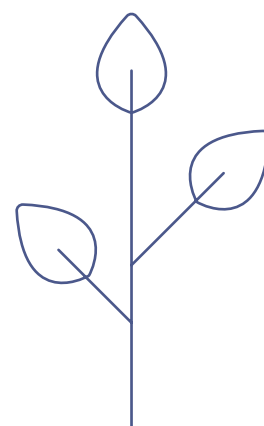
For writers, as for others, the anxieties and uncertainties of the present and the future mean that finding the space to be creative can still be challenging. This is especially true for writers who have, or who are caring for someone with, underlying health conditions. For such individuals, a reopening world can represent a source of danger and fear.

Continued thought also needs to be given to those writers suffering long-term economic effects from the lockdown. If writers are to have the practical and emotional time and space to write and discover, supportive measures implemented during lockdown need to be maintained, or even redoubled, as we move forward.

Some of these measures could include continuing to create and signpost writers to online resources, as well as financial and emotional support. By reducing practical concerns, writers may be freer to explore and discover. Furthermore, throughout this rapidly changing period, special efforts could be made to celebrate the value of writing in helping us to discuss and process difficult experiences. This could be of benefit, in part, because it might help writers to continue to find fulfilment in creating their work, and take the time and space necessary to explore.

Further research is needed to explore ways in which writers could help to mitigate the effects of school closures on the most vulnerable young learner-writers. Collaborations between authors and schools could help teachers to adapt approaches to empower young writers by giving them the space and support they need to write, discover, explore and grow.

Across the country, community writing groups have been providing valuable creative and emotional support for adult writers in response to the pandemic. Paper Nations is keen to work with network organisations such as NAWE to map these groups to gain a better understanding of how we can continue to sustain support for writers in the Discovery phase.



Connection

In the Connection phase of The Writer's Cycle, some writers realise their need for community in order to write, whilst others come to understand that they prefer to connect to the world through solitary pursuits such as reading or spending time in nature. For all groups, Covid-19 posed and continues to pose problems.

For writers who are comfortable with working alone, the type of isolation imposed by the pandemic has been very different in tone to one undertaken by choice. For those who like to work collaboratively or around others, the lockdown meant that this was rendered more difficult. Furthermore, loneliness may have negatively affected creativity. Some vulnerable young writers will have found that the people or places they usually turn to for support were less available to them. Some may not even have access to the internet.

This noted, there has also been a flourishing of online literary events during lockdown which were designed with the aim of bringing people together though physically apart. There also is a long established culture of writing groups and development agencies across the country (Writing West Midlands, Literature Works, Write Club, and Novel Nights, to name just a few). These agencies and groups responded with generosity to the crisis, many providing free workshops, advice and blogs to meet rising demand for writing support.

As lockdown begins to ease, issues of isolation and marginalisation are only brought into sharper relief. Although many are beginning to socialise and work in face-to-face contexts once more, for those who are more vulnerable to the virus or who are caring for someone who is, these freedoms are still out of reach.

For those with a more entrenched, longer-term experience of isolation, the lockdown may have represented a brief period of solidarity in which their experiences were more widely understood. The end of lockdown risks a withdrawal of this empathy. Some writers with disabilities or other conditions may have found that the increased abundance of online literary events during lockdown offered an opportunity for inclusion which they had not previously experienced. A reduction in such events could lead to a deepening sense of isolation with knock-on impacts on writers' ability to find the connection they need to form ideas, write, and share that writing. Accessibility in the arts will now need to include consideration of the medically vulnerable.

When considering how Connection has been affected by Covid-19, it is also important to note the society-wide divisions which this pandemic has made more visible. In this moment of great historical upheaval, marked not only by the pandemic but also by anti-racism protests across the globe, the Connection theme may be affected in several ways.

For some writers, feelings of injustice, hurt and disconnect may make it harder to foster a sense of community and togetherness conducive to a fulfilling writing life. For others, the need to practically engage with current issues may make finding time to write more difficult.

However, it is also true that writing and writers can help us to process and respond to the challenges we face, both individually and communally. For some writers, increased awareness and public discussion of inequality may help build a greater sense of togetherness and possibility, allowing them to find wider audiences for writing which addresses such issues.

Several steps could be taken to foster Connection as we emerge from lockdown. Online writing events and groups could continue to be created and shared. Writer-facilitators could consider whether they have the resources to support vulnerable writers during this time, perhaps through phone calls or letters -- this particularly applies to writers who are still needing to shield or limit their interactions due to underlying health conditions or similar. Most of all, writing can be used as a tool to reveal and strengthen the ways in which we continue to be connected as we slowly emerge from a period of physical distance. Writing can be championed as a means of carefully responding to the complexities of this period. By seeking to promote greater diversity in writing created and shared, a wider range of perspectives, approaches and solutions will emerge.



Craft

The Craft phase of The Writer's Cycle involves writers taking time to hone their voice and absorb influence from other writers. Writers will likely work on developing an inner editor, and in addition may seek the guidance of an external editor.

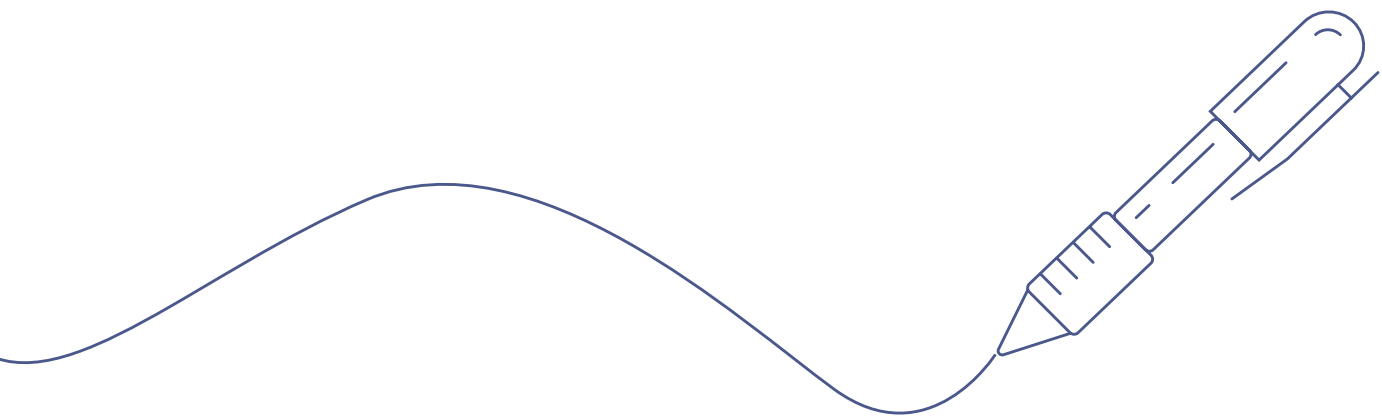
There were obvious barriers to face-to-face contact with editors during the height of the lockdown. Moreover, with diminished capacity to discover and connect, as well as limited access to the usual means of accessing reading materials, writers may have found they lacked the concentration needed to focus on their craft. As restrictions are eased, barriers remain in place for the most clinically vulnerable or those with caring responsibilities.

However, for some writers the current situation may act to heighten the urgency of writing. The desire to write effectively about injustices or instances of bravery, as well as to imagine better or changed futures, may cause writers to refine their craft. Certainly, there is evidence to suggest that demand during the pandemic has been high for resources which support writers to develop their craft.

To help mitigate some of the negative effects of the pandemic on a writer's ability to craft, it is important that the positive moves made during the lockdown are not forgotten. Innovative ways of delivering craft support to writers from all backgrounds should still be sought and implemented. Similarly, the steps outlined to help writers discover and connect should continue to be considered as lockdown relaxes. All phases are interdependent.

For younger writers still in school or further education, creative writing could be used as a tool to help mitigate the effects of recent school closures. Helping young writers to hone their craft may help them to continue to learn, grow and process current upheavals and uncertainties.

Supporting writers to access free or low-cost support will remain important. It is also important to understand the economic pressures that writing facilitators are facing. A balance can be struck between supporting these ecologies whilst also ensuring that writers on low incomes are signposted towards good quality free or inexpensive opportunities.



Transformation

The Transformation phase of The Writer's Cycle refers to three potential transformations. Firstly, the personal or professional development of the writer. Secondly, the transformation of their words (for example, through publication, performance, or mediation). Thirdly, cultural or societal transformations as expressed through the body of the writing, the context within which the writing is produced, and/or through discussion ensuing from the content, emotions, and ideas emanating from the text.

The current pandemic intensifies the writer's relationship to all three forms of transformation. For writers whose work would usually be transformed by performance to an in-venue audience, social distancing remains a challenge. Online festivals and digital modes of distribution can provide some outlets for the transforming and distribution of writing.

For those seeking publication in books, the picture is mixed. Whilst there is evidence to suggest higher levels of reading during the lockdown, the publishing industry is nevertheless unlikely to emerge unscathed from the economic effects of the pandemic. Depleted resources in publishing may make it harder for more marginalised or experimental writers to achieve publication. Small presses, venues and charities which might usually support writers such as these are also likely to be hardest hit.

Writers who seek to bring about cultural transformations through their writing face an uncertain audience reaction. Only time will tell whether audiences will be less or more receptive to ideas explored through the written word. It could be that the public will seek comfort in the aftermath of the pandemic; equally, they could be more open to writing which seeks to challenge the old 'normal'.

Personal and professional transformations for writers have also been disrupted by Covid-19. It may be harder for writers to take steps to transform their lifestyle into one which best supports their writing. They may not have been able to spend as much time with mentors, and they may feel more uncertain of their writing identity.

Steps to soften the impacts of the pandemic on Transformation might include some of the following. Writers needing to transform their practice to meet the needs of the current situation could seek help to do so online. As lockdown eases, there is a need for an urgent reimagining of the layout and operation of theatres and cultural spaces to allow for safe resumption of performances and events.

Alternatives to in-venue performances could continue to be sought -- for example, online and live-streamed events. There is some concern that many of the online events which took place during lockdown were only made possible through emergency sources of funding and by authors' willingness to contribute time and expertise free of charge during a crisis. Such a model is clearly unsustainable. If innovation and inclusion are to be the touchstones of writing communities as we move beyond Covid-19, there is a need for widespread transformation and investment in the creation and sharing of accessible, adaptable resources and events.

By supporting charities and small presses, emerging and marginalised writers can in turn be supported. Engaging with writing and reading could be promoted as a means of processing and responding to the crisis; in this way, audiences might be left more receptive to cultural transformations.

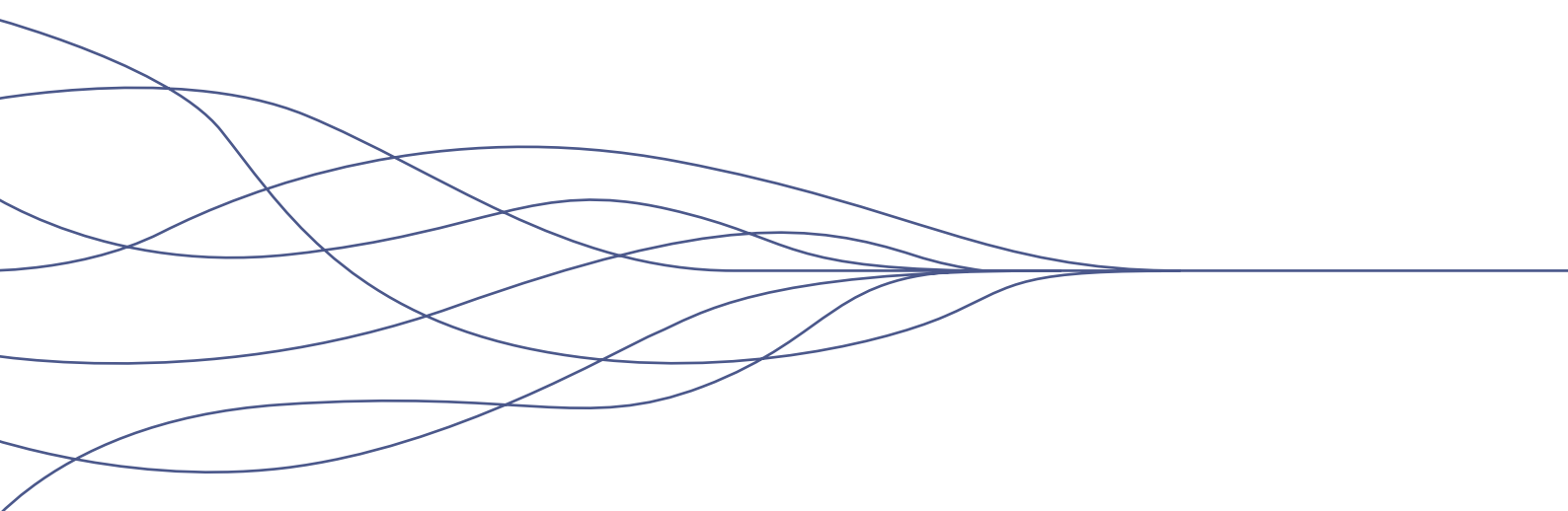
Workplaces and educational environments will need to think more carefully about how they support the development of writers within their care. Continuing to value writers and writing as means of responding to the questions we currently face may encourage employers and educators to maintain investment in writers.

The Writer's Cycle model itself may prove instrumental in supporting writers and the writing ecology to make necessary transformations in the wake of Covid-19. On a more individual basis, The Writer's Cycle provides actionable suggestions for supporting writers at all times, including times of crisis, thereby facilitating their ability to make personal and creative transformations in their writing and lifestyle.

More widely, it can be used as a framework for envisaging and designing adaptation, and could help implement changes in education, writing communities and the delivery and promotion of the creative arts. This could build resilience across creative industries and allow writers to respond innovatively and robustly to rapidly changing circumstances.

The government's recent announcement of a £33.5 million fund for school improvement suggests that there is appetite for educational change. Further research could reveal how The Writer's Cycle can be a part of this movement, emphasising writing's central role in learning, and outlining pathways for reflection and change-making.

Throughout history, writers have created in and from a context of disruption and challenge. If the writing ecology can be supported in the ways described in this document, it is possible that reactions to this tragic pandemic could form part of an overarching writing and cultural transformation.



Summary and Implications

Covid-19 has severely disrupted and intensified the daily rituals and habits of anyone who writes for pleasure, for learning or for a living. A disruption of our writing lives has widespread implications for any sector (cultural, educational and business) that depends on the exchange of good quality written texts.

Writing is an important medium in the lives of most people. Within education and the workplace, writing is a medium for expression, analysis and communication. Good writing requires space to think and explore. Given the potential severity of ongoing interruptions to our writing lives, further research is needed into how best to support writers to keep going during times of crisis and beyond.

Many writers also seek community and connection to others. This can be found online as well as through 'in person' interaction. Anyone with access to a mobile phone and internet connection can easily 'publish' their words. With minimal effort most writers can find an audience. Online spaces for sharing writing have huge emancipatory benefits, but there are also dangers.

Further research into The Writer's Cycle would enable these challenges and opportunities to be explored in greater depth. It would facilitate the development of actionable, evidence-based solutions. Furthermore, it could enable us to better understand experiences of writing as an interpretive practice during times of crisis.

Writing-facilitators have a key role to play in mobilising and connecting the collective efforts of writing communities to respond to the crisis. Demand for online tuition has surged during the pandemic. Organisations such as NAWA can be pivotal in ensuring that access to online writing tuition is not limited to the most privileged of learners, but instead can bring the benefits of creative writing to as many adults and young people as possible.

Writing is a medium for personal and cultural transformation, and can be as important as science in the fight against Covid-19. We turn to science when we want to identify the facts, the risks, and the underlying trends. Yet, writing and words enable us to process, interpret and share data in meaningful ways. As we take tentative steps towards imagining the aftermath of this crisis, writing also provides a means for personal and societal reflection, healing and transformation.

To Summarise

Writing is an important medium in the lives of most people. Within education and the workplace, it is a medium for expression, for thought and for communication. We write to reflect and to connect to others. In times of crisis writing can be a lifeline. Moving forward, by facilitating a wider understanding of The Writer's Cycle, we can support more people to explore complexity, navigate fears and imagine futures.



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