

Gratitude Letter

Write a letter to someone you never properly thanked — and, if you can, read it to them.



15 min practice + 5 min journal

Standard practice

Handwritten journal, dated & timed

GGIA difficulty: Moderate

1 Why you should try it

Feeling gratitude can improve health and happiness; expressing gratitude also strengthens relationships. Yet sometimes expressions of thanks can be fleeting and superficial. This exercise encourages you to express gratitude in a thoughtful, deliberate way by writing — and, ideally, delivering — a letter of gratitude to a person you have never properly thanked.

2 The session — Prof. Magee's 15-minute protocol

Follow these timings, not the website's. Set a timer. One session = the 15 minutes below, then 5 minutes of journaling immediately after. Each session = one letter to a different person (15 min of writing). At least 4 sessions in your window; **delivering** one of the letters (in person, phone, or video) also counts as a session — and is where the biggest effects were found.

2'

10'

3'

2 Choose the person

MIN

Call to mind someone who did something for you for which you are extremely grateful but to whom you never expressed your deep gratitude — a relative, friend, teacher, coach, coworker. Pick someone still alive who could meet you face-to-face or on a call this month. It may be most helpful to pick a person or act you haven't thought about for a while.

10 Write the letter

MIN

Address them directly ("Dear _____"). Don't worry about grammar or spelling. Describe in specific terms what this person did, why you are grateful, and how their behavior affected your life — be as concrete as possible. Then describe what you are doing in your life now and how you often remember their efforts. Aim for roughly one page (~300 words).

3 Read it aloud to yourself, then plan delivery

MIN

Read the letter out loud once, slowly. Then decide: in person, phone, or video? Plan the visit — tell them you'd like to see them and have something special to share, but don't reveal the purpose. When you meet, ask them not to interrupt, take your time reading, watch their reaction and your own, talk afterward, and leave the letter with them.

3 Then journal — 5 minutes, by hand

- Top of the entry: **date and time**. Entries without both lose credit.
- Write for **5 minutes without stopping** (about 300 words). Messy is fine; stopping is not.

- Before / during / after: how did you feel at each point? Be specific — body, mood, thoughts.
- What surprised you? What felt fake, awkward, or easier than expected?
- **Prompt:** What was it like to be that specific and that sincere on paper? Where did you hold back, and why?
- **Prompt:** If you delivered it: what happened on their face, and what happened in you? If you didn't: what stopped you?

4 Evidence that it works

Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005)

When researchers tested five different exercises, the gratitude visit showed the greatest positive effect on participants' happiness one month later; however, six months after the visit, their happiness had dropped back down to where it was before. This is why some researchers suggest doing this exercise once every six weeks or so.

Froh, J. J., Kashdan, T. B., Ozimkowski, K. M., & Miller, N. (2009)

Adolescents who don't generally experience much positive emotion showed a significant boost in positive emotions two months after doing a gratitude visit. Research suggests that while there are benefits simply to writing the letter, you reap significantly greater benefits from delivering and reading it in person.

5 Why it works

The letter affirms positive things in your life and reminds you how others have cared for you — life seems less bleak and lonely if someone has taken such a supportive interest in us. Visiting the giver allows you to strengthen your connection with them and remember how others value you as an individual.

6 Know the research — for your presentation (APA 7)

In your presentation you will explain, **from memory and without notes**, the evidence behind each practice — who studied it, when, and what they found — plus something *not* written on the GGIA site or on this handout. Read these papers (SJNY library or Google Scholar), then follow their citations forward to find **your own article** — one more peer-reviewed study on this topic that is not the source study here (due Sun Dec 6). Take photos along the way; they are your slides.

Seligman, M. E. P., Steen, T. A., Park, N., & Peterson, C. (2005). Positive psychology progress: Empirical validation of interventions. *American Psychologist*, 60(5), 410–421. <https://doi.org/10.1037/0003-066X.60.5.410>

Froh, J. J., Kashdan, T. B., Ozimkowski, K. M., & Miller, N. (2009). Who benefits the most from a gratitude intervention in children and adolescents? Examining positive affect as a moderator. *The Journal of Positive Psychology*, 4(5), 408–422. <https://doi.org/10.1080/17439760902992464>

Adapted for PSY 251 from Greater Good in Action, Greater Good Science Center, UC Berkeley — original at https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/gratitude_letter. Practice sources: Sonja Lyubomirsky, Ph.D., University of California, Riverside; Kristin Layous, Ph.D.; Martin Seligman, Ph.D., University of Pennsylvania. Timings, session structure, and journal rules are Prof. Magee's and override the website's.