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## Writing About Oneself in a Restrictive Educational Context: Diaries, Emotional Regulation, and Creative Literacy in Islamic Boarding Schools

Laili Amalia<sup>1</sup>; Adi Gunawan<sup>2</sup>; Muhammad Tauhed Supratman<sup>3</sup>; Ridwan Lanya<sup>4</sup>; Abdul Hoffer<sup>5</sup>

<sup>1,2,3,4,5</sup>Prodi Bahasa Indonesia, FKIP, Universitas Madura, Pamekasan, Indonesia

Corresponding author, email: [lailiamalia@unira.ac.id](mailto:lailiamalia@unira.ac.id)

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### Abstract

This study examines diary writing as a private reflective practice among female students in Islamic boarding schools characterized by strong behavioral and communication norms. Previous studies have generally positioned diary writing as either a therapeutic expressive practice or language-learning exercise. Limited attention has been given to how diary writing simultaneously functions as an emotional regulation and reflective literacy practice within highly regulated boarding-school environments. This study aimed to identify patterns of emotional regulation in students' diary writing and examine how personal diary experiences are transformed into short fictional narratives. Using a case study diary-study design at Bahrul Huda Islamic Boarding School in Pamekasan, Indonesia, 20 female students aged 13–15 years wrote daily diaries over a one-month period. Data were collected through diary documents, perception questionnaires, and short stories developed from selected diary entries. The data were analyzed thematically, descriptively, and through genre-transfer assessment. The findings indicate that diary writing functions as a perceived safe space for emotional expression and reflective self-evaluation. Most participants demonstrated a recurring emotional pattern involving stressful experiences, emotional labelling, cathartic release, reflection, and personal resolution. However, the transfer from reflective diary writing to short-story writing remained limited, as many students produced narrative texts that were weakly connected to their original diary experiences and still dominated by report-like storytelling. This study contributes to understanding how private reflective writing mediates emotional regulation and literacy development within restrictive educational environments and highlights the importance of gradual genre scaffolding in creative writing instruction.

**Keyword:** diary; self-writing; emotional regulation; Islamic boarding school; genre transfer; creative literacy

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### A. INTRODUCTION

The boarding school environment presents distinct pedagogical and psychological challenges for adolescent students. As students enter highly structured residential learning systems, they are required not only to adapt academically but also to negotiate emotional pressures arising from separation from family, strict routines, peer interaction, and institutional discipline. During early adolescence, the ability to regulate emotions becomes an important component of students'

social adaptation and learning readiness because unresolved emotional tension may affect psychological well-being, interpersonal adjustment, and participation in educational activities (Hastasari et al., 2022; Zhou, 2024). Therefore, emotional regulation in educational settings should not be understood merely as an individual psychological issue, but also as part of the broader pedagogical responsibility of educational institutions to provide mechanisms through which students can recognize, articulate, and manage emotional experiences constructively (Fang et al., 2025; Wang et al., 2023).

Islamic boarding schools (pesantrens) represent highly structured residential educational environments characterized by strong disciplinary systems, hierarchical authority relations, and communication norms emphasizing politeness, obedience, and social conformity (Fitriani et al., 2023; Irfana et al., 2023; Rahman, 2022). These characteristics play an important role in character formation and moral education. However, for some adolescent students, particularly new female students undergoing adaptation processes, such environments may also create emotional communication barriers because personal problems, anxiety, or emotional discomfort are not always easily expressed in interpersonal settings. Preliminary observations at Bahrul Huda Islamic Boarding School in Pamekasan indicated that several students experienced homesickness, routine pressure, emotional stress, and hesitation in communicating personal feelings openly due to fear of embarrassment, social judgement, or negative peer responses. These conditions suggest the importance of alternative and socially safe channels for emotional expression within boarding school environments.

One potential medium for such an expression is diary writing. As a form of self-writing, diaries provide private reflective spaces where individuals can narrate experiences, articulate emotions, and construct personal meanings through written language. In expressive writing research, diary writing has frequently been associated with catharsis, emotional release, and psychological coping (Bernal Marcos et al., 2024; Hsu et al., 2023; Sohal et al., 2022). Meanwhile, literacy studies have positioned reflective writing as a practice that supports self-awareness, personal voice development, and writing fluency (Ramadhanti et al., 2020; Sudirman et al., 2021). In educational contexts characterized by strong communication norms, diary writing may function not only as personal therapy but also as a private literacy practice that enables emotional articulation without direct interpersonal exposure. In this sense, diaries can operate as “safe spaces” for emotional disclosure while simultaneously supporting reflective literacy development.

Despite these potentials, previous studies have generally examined diary writing from two perspectives. First, expressive-writing studies predominantly focus on therapeutic outcomes, such as stress reduction, emotional release, or psychological well-being. Second, literacy-oriented studies commonly position diary writing as a language-learning exercise that emphasizes writing fluency, vocabulary growth, or reflective learning outcomes. Limited attention has been given to how diary writing simultaneously functions as an emotional regulation practice and reflective literacy activity within highly regulated Islamic boarding-school environments. Furthermore, little research has examined the challenge of transferring reflective self-writing into genre-based creative narratives, such as short stories. The ability to transform personal reflective experiences into fictional narrative forms requires not only writing fluency but also genre competence involving narrative structure, dramatic representation, characterization, and fictionalization strategies.

Addressing these gaps, this study investigates diary writing as a form of “self-writing under restrictive educational context,” referring to educational environments characterized by strong behavioral regulation and communication norms that may limit open emotional expression. The

study specifically aims to: (1) identify patterns of catharsis and emotional regulation in students' diary writing; (2) examine how restrictive sociocultural contexts influence students' self-writing strategies; and (3) analyze the extent to which diary-writing practices facilitate or constrain transfer into genre-based creative writing, particularly short-story production. Conceptually, this study contributes to the development of a framework that links restrictive communication contexts, private reflective writing, emotional regulation processes, and creative literacy development. Pedagogically, these findings have implications for reflection-based writing instruction and gradual genre scaffolding in boarding-school literacy education.

## **B. METHOD**

### **Research Design**

This study employed a qualitative case study design incorporating a diary-study approach to examine diary writing as a form of self-writing and reflective literacy practice among female students in an Islamic boarding school context. The case study design enabled an in-depth exploration of emotional expression, reflective processes, and literacy practices situated within a specific sociocultural environment (Stake, 1995; Yin, 2018). Meanwhile, the diary-study approach allowed researchers to capture emotional and reflective experiences as they developed over time through naturally produced written texts rather than relying solely on retrospective interviews or one-time observations.

This study was conducted at the Bahrul Huda Islamic Boarding School in Pamekasan, Indonesia. This research focused on diary-writing practices used by students as a medium for emotional expression, self-reflection, and narrative transformation. The units of analysis consisted of diary entries as the primary qualitative data source, perception questionnaires as supporting descriptive data, and short-story products generated from selected diary entries as indicators of transfer towards creative literacy.

### **Participants**

The participants consisted of 20 female students aged 13–15 years, representing early adolescent learners within the boarding-school environment. Participants were recruited through purposive convenience sampling in coordination with the boarding school administration. The inclusion criteria comprised active female students residing in the boarding school, basic writing ability sufficient for diary-writing activities, willingness to participate throughout the one-month writing program, and agreement to allow anonymized diary analysis for research purposes.

Participation was voluntary, and students were informed that diary writing would not be used for disciplinary or academic evaluation. To minimize self-censorship and preserve authentic emotional expression, participants retained the right to omit sensitive sections or withdraw from the study at any stage without academic or social consequences.

### **Data Collection**

Data collection was conducted chronologically from November 14 to December 12, 2025. At the beginning of the program, participants attended an orientation session introducing the purpose of diary writing, the concept of reflective self-writing, and the basic structure of diary entries, including descriptions of events, emotions, and reflections. The researchers also provided reflective prompts related to students' daily experiences, emotional situations, routines, social relationships, and adaptation challenges in boarding school life. The orientation emphasized that

diary writing was intended as a private and safe reflective activity rather than a formal academic assignment.

Participants subsequently wrote daily diary entries independently throughout the program period. Each entry generally contained descriptions of daily events, dominant emotions, emotional reactions, reflective responses, and muhasabah. Participants were encouraged to write at least one paragraph or approximately five to eight sentences per entry, although flexibility was maintained to preserve the personal and non-evaluative nature of the writing process. During the writing period, researchers monitored participation administratively but did not evaluate or comment on diary content to maintain privacy and reduce writing anxiety.

At the end of the writing programme, all participants completed a Likert-scale perception questionnaire ranging from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree.” The questionnaire was developed based on the literature concerning expressive writing, emotional regulation, and reflective literacy practices (Hsu et al., 2023; Ramadhanti et al., 2020; Sohal et al., 2022). The instrument measured four dimensions: emotional relief after writing, diary writing as a safe space for self-expression, perceived improvement in writing fluency and vocabulary, and perceptions regarding the transformation of diary writing into short-story narratives. Representative questionnaire items included statements such as “Writing a diary helps me release emotions that I cannot express directly,” “I feel calmer after writing my diary,” and “Diary writing helps me develop ideas for stories.”

Prior to administration, the questionnaire underwent content validation through an expert review involving two specialists in literacy education and qualitative research methodology. Minor revisions were conducted to improve readability and clarity for adolescent participants. In addition, the questionnaire was piloted with three non-participating students from similar educational backgrounds to ensure comprehensibility.

Following the diary-writing phase, participants were instructed to select one meaningful diary entry and transform it into a short story narrative. Participants were encouraged to apply safe fictionalization strategies, such as changing names, locations, or personal details, to preserve emotional security and privacy. This task was designed to examine how reflective self-writing practices are transformed into genre-based creative narratives.

## **Data Analysis**

The analysis integrated thematic, descriptive, and genre-transfer assessments. Diary entries were analyzed thematically through several stages, consisting of familiarization with the texts, open coding, categorization, theme development, and interpretative synthesis. Initial coding focused on emotional and reflective dimensions, such as stressful episodes, emotional labelling, cathartic release, reflection or muhasabah, and internal resolution. Expressions such as “I cannot say it aloud” were initially coded as emotional suppression, whereas statements such as “Tomorrow I will try to be more patient” were categorized as reflective reappraisal and personal resolution.

To improve analytical reliability, two researchers independently coded 25% of the diary entries selected randomly from the dataset. Intercoder reliability was calculated using Cohen’s kappa and produced a coefficient of 0.82, indicating strong agreement between coders. Coding discrepancies were discussed iteratively until a consensus was reached. A coding manual containing operational definitions and representative excerpts was maintained as part of the audit trial.

Questionnaire responses were analyzed descriptively using frequencies and percentages to identify dominant participant perceptions regarding emotional regulation, reflective writing experience, and perceived literacy development. The questionnaire findings were primarily used for triangulation purposes rather than causal inference.

The short stories were analysed using a genre-transfer rubric scored on a 0–2 scale, where 0 indicated “Absent,” 1 indicated “Emerging,” and 2 indicated “Evident.” The rubric assessed five dimensions: narrative structure, story elements, narrative mode, attachment to diary sources, and safe fictionalization. Two raters independently evaluated all short-story products. Prior to scoring, both raters participated in rubric familiarization sessions involving discussion of scoring descriptors and joint evaluation of sample texts to improve scoring consistency. The inter-rater agreement reached 0.79, indicating acceptable reliability for interpretative assessment. Differences in scoring were resolved through discussion until a consensus was achieved.

The rubric was adapted from genre-based narrative-writing and reflective-writing transfer principles and was intended to identify patterns of genre transfer from reflective diary writing to short-story narratives, rather than to evaluate literary quality.

Table 1. Genre-Transfer Assessment Rubric for Diary-to-Short-Story Transformation

Indicator	0 = Absent	1 = Emerging	2 = Evident
Narrative Structure	Narrative structure absent or fragmented; events presented as isolated reports	Partial narrative sequence present, but conflict or resolution remains underdeveloped	Coherent narrative structure with clear introduction, conflict, climax, and resolution
Story Elements	Characters, setting, and conflict unclear or minimally developed	Some narrative elements identifiable, but development remains limited	Characters, setting, and conflict clearly developed and integrated into the narrative
Narrative Mode	Writing remains predominantly reflective or report-like with minimal scenes or dialogue	Combination of reflective and dramatic narration appears inconsistently	Sustained dramatic narration with scenes, dialogue, and descriptive details
Attachment to Diary Source	No identifiable linkage between the short story and the original diary entry	Partial thematic or emotional linkage to diary content	Strong transformation from diary entry into fictional narrative while retaining core emotional experience
Safe Fictionalisation	Personal identities or sensitive details openly exposed	Partial fictional masking applied to names or situations	Personal identities effectively fictionalised while maintaining narrative coherence

Note. The rubric was adapted from the principles of genre-based narrative writing and reflective writing transfer. The assessment focused on identifying patterns of genre transfer from reflective diary writing to short-story narratives rather than evaluating literary quality.

### Trustworthiness and Ethical Considerations

Trustworthiness was enhanced through methodological triangulation involving diary entries, questionnaires, and short-story products. Analytical transparency was supported through double coding, intercoder reliability reporting, audit-trial documentation, and consensus-based interpretation.

Ethical considerations were prioritized because the study involved personal reflective writing by adolescent participants. All diary entries and narrative products were anonymized by removing identifiable names and personal references. Participants retained the right to exclude

sensitive sections from the analysis. Institutional permission was obtained through coordination with the boarding school administration prior to data collection.

To minimize psychological risk, diary writing was positioned as a voluntary reflective activity rather than an evaluative assignment. In cases where severe emotional distress appeared in the participants' writing, referral mechanisms were prepared through agreed institutional support channels while maintaining participant confidentiality.

## C. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### Results

#### 1. Cathartic and Emotional-Regulation Patterns in Diary Writing

Thematic analysis revealed a recurring emotional-regulation sequence in participants' diary writing consisting of stressful episodes, emotional labelling, cathartic release, reflection or muhasabah, and internal resolution. A complete five-stage pattern appeared in 14 of 20 participants, whereas the remaining participants demonstrated partial patterns, typically ending with emotional release without explicit reflective closure.

The most frequently reported stressful experiences involved homesickness, adaptation difficulties, routine pressure, and peer-related tensions within the boarding school environment. Homesickness appeared in 15 participants, routine pressure in 12, and interpersonal tension in 10. These stressful episodes were generally narrated through detailed recounting of daily experiences before shifting to emotional expression and reflective interpretation.

The diary entries also demonstrated strong tendencies towards emotional labelling and cathartic disclosure. Participants frequently articulated emotions such as sadness, anxiety, anger, loneliness, and emotional suppression. Expressions such as "I am angry, but I cannot say it aloud" and "I do not know who I can talk to" indicated that diary writing functioned as a private medium for emotional articulation in situations where direct interpersonal communication was perceived as difficult or risky.

In many entries, emotional disclosure was followed by reflection or muhasabah. Participants often attempted to reinterpret stressful experiences, regulate emotional reactions, and formulate personal resolutions for subsequent situations. Reflective expressions such as "Perhaps I need to be more patient" or "Tomorrow I will try not to overthink" suggest that diary writing frequently extends beyond emotional release towards self-evaluation and emotional restructuring.

#### 2. Participants' Perceptions of Diary Writing

The questionnaire findings reinforced the thematic patterns identified in the diary entries. Most participants perceived diary writing as emotionally beneficial and psychologically safe. Strong agreement emerged, particularly on the perception of diaries as safe spaces for emotional honesty and private expression. Participants also reported feelings of emotional relief and calmness after writing.

Positive perceptions also appeared in relation to writing fluency and vocabulary development, although these responses were less dominant than those concerning emotional expression. This pattern suggests that participants primarily experienced diary writing as a reflective-emotional practice rather than merely a linguistic exercise.

Table 2. Summary of Participants' Questionnaire Responses (n = 20)

Dimension	Indicator	SA	A	N	D	SD
Emotional Relief	Diary writing helps release pent-up emotions	14	6	0	0	0
Emotional Regulation	Feeling calmer after writing feelings	13	7	0	0	0
Safe Expression	Diary provides a safe space for honesty	18	2	0	0	0
Emotional Control	Easier to manage emotions after writing	6	12	2	0	0
Writing Fluency	Increased ease in sentence construction	11	8	1	0	0
Writing Development	Improvement in paragraph development	10	9	1	0	0

**Note.** SA = Strongly Agree; A = Agree; N = Neutral; D = Disagree; SD = Strongly Disagree.

The questionnaire results indicated that diary writing was perceived primarily as a mechanism for emotional disclosure and reflective self-expression, rather than solely as a technical writing exercise.

### 3. Transfer from Diary Writing to Short-Story Narratives

The findings reveal a noticeable gap between reflective diary writing and genre-based narrative writing. Although participants were generally able to express emotions and personal experiences through diary entries, many encountered difficulties when transforming those experiences into fictional short stories that required a dramatic structure and narrative development.

Only three short stories demonstrated strong attachment to the original diary entries, whereas most narratives either displayed partial thematic connections or shifted entirely towards unrelated fictional themes. Fables and general moral stories became the dominant alternatives among participants who struggled to transform personal experiences into narrative fiction.

The most prominent difficulty involved the narrative mode. Many short stories remained reflective and report-like rather than dramatic and scene-based. This pattern indicates that reflective self-writing competence does not automatically translate into narrative genre competence.

Table 3. Genre-Transfer Assessment Results (n = 20)

Indicator	0 = Absent	1 = Emerging	2 = Evident
Narrative Structure	9 (45%)	8 (40%)	3 (15%)
Story Elements	7 (35%)	10 (50%)	3 (15%)
Narrative Mode	13 (65%)	6 (30%)	1 (5%)
Attachment to Diary Source	12 (60%)	5 (25%)	3 (15%)
Safe Fictionalisation	1 (5%)	6 (30%)	13 (65%)

The findings also showed that safe fictionalization was relatively strong. Most participants modified their names, identities, or situational details when transforming diary experiences into stories, indicating an awareness of privacy and emotional security during narrative production.

## Discussion

### 1. Self-Writing under Restrictive Educational Contexts

The findings suggest that diary writing functions as a negotiated private space for emotional expression within a highly regulated boarding-school environment. In this study,

restrictive educational context does not refer to negative institutional judgement but to communication conditions characterized by strong behavioral norms, hierarchical relationships, and social expectations that may discourage direct emotional disclosure among adolescents.

In such environments, diary writing appeared to operate as a low-risk emotional channel because it enabled participants to articulate emotions without direct interpersonal exposure. This finding supports literacy perspectives that view writing not merely as linguistic performance but also as a socially situated practice shaped by institutional and cultural conditions (Horn et al., 2021; Lea & Street, 2006; Luke, 2004; Rauch & Ansari, 2025). The preference for diary writing indicates that emotional communication among adolescent students may involve strategic negotiation of privacy and social safety.

At the same time, the findings reveal important tension. Although diary writing provides emotional security, heavy dependence on private expression may also indicate limited opportunities for dialogic emotional communication within institutional settings. Thus, diary writing should not be interpreted as replacing interpersonal support, but rather as complementing emotional coping mechanisms within socially regulated educational environments.

## 2. Diary Writing and Emotional-Regulation Mechanisms

The recurring sequence of stressful experiences, emotional labelling, cathartic disclosure, reflection, and resolution suggests that diary writing functioned as a more than simple emotional release. These findings indicate that emotional articulation frequently develops into reflective processing and cognitive reappraisal.

This finding aligns with expressive-writing literature arguing that emotional disclosure becomes psychologically meaningful when accompanied by reflective restructuring and meaning-making processes (Lai et al., 2023; Lukenda et al., 2024; Ruini & Mortara, 2022). In the present study, emotional labelling appeared to help participants identify and externalize previously suppressed emotions, while reflective responses enabled them to reinterpret stressful experiences more constructively.

The presence of muhasabah is also significant because reflection within the boarding school context appears culturally embedded rather than purely individualistic. Reflection frequently involves moral evaluation, patience, self-control, and spiritual self-correction. This suggests that emotional regulation in Islamic boarding schools may operate through culturally congruent reflective frameworks rather than through purely psychological coping strategies. Consequently, the findings contribute to understanding emotional regulation not only as intrapersonal management but also as culturally mediated reflective practice.

## 3. Reflective Literacy and the Genre-Transfer Gap

One of the most important findings of this study was the gap between reflective writing competence and narrative genre competence. Although the participants demonstrated strong abilities in emotional articulation and reflective self-expression, these capacities did not automatically translate into fictional narrative production.

The dominance of reflective and report-like storytelling indicates that diary writing primarily strengthened expressive literacy rather than dramatic narrative construction. Transforming personal experiences into short stories required additional genre-related competencies involving plot development, scene construction, characterization, and dramatic sequencing. This finding supports genre-based pedagogy literature emphasizing that genre mastery requires explicit scaffolding rather than repetitive writing practice alone (Carey et al., 2022; Nagao, 2019; Zohbie & Bhowmik, 2024) .

Importantly, the findings suggest that reflective and creative narrative literacy should not be treated as identical constructs. Reflective diary writing enables students to process emotions and construct personal meaning, whereas short-story writing requires aesthetic and structural transformation of experience into reader-oriented narratives. Therefore, the transfer gap identified in this study should not be interpreted as failure, but rather as evidence that emotional expression and narrative fiction operate through partially distinct literacy mechanisms.

At the same time, the strong tendency towards safe fictionalization demonstrates that privacy negotiation became a central factor in narrative transformation. Participants often altered their names, settings, and situational details while preserving the emotional cores of their experiences. This indicates that fictionalization functioned not merely as a creative technique but also as an emotional-protective strategy within reflective literacy practices.

#### 4. Theoretical Contribution

Conceptually, this study contributes to the development of the “self-writing under restrictive educational context” framework by explaining how emotionally regulated literacy practices emerge within highly structured and characterized environments. This study bridges expressive-writing theory, emotional-regulation research, and genre-based literacy pedagogy within a single analytical framework.

These findings demonstrate that restrictive communication environments shape students’ preferences for private reflective channels and influence how emotional experiences transform into literacy practices. Furthermore, the study highlights that reflective literacy development does not automatically produce genre-based creative competence, thereby emphasizing the importance of gradual narrative scaffolding in creative writing pedagogy.

#### D. CONCLUSION

This study demonstrates that diary writing functions as a private reflective channel that enables female students in Islamic boarding schools to articulate emotions, process stressful experiences, and construct personal reflections within a highly regulated educational environment. The findings revealed a recurring emotional regulation sequence consisting of stressful experiences, emotional labelling, cathartic disclosure, reflection or *muhasabah*, and internal resolution. The study also identified a substantial gap between reflective diary-writing competence and genre-based short-story writing, indicating that emotional expression and narrative construction operate through a partially distinct literacy capacity. Although diary writing effectively supported emotional articulation and reflective literacy, it did not automatically equip students with the dramatic and structural competencies required for fictional narrative production.

Conceptually, this study contributes to the development of the “self-writing under restrictive educational context” framework by explaining how reflective literacy practices mediate emotional regulation in environments characterised by strong communication norms and social regulation. The findings extend previous expressive-writing and literacy studies by demonstrating that reflective self-writing simultaneously operates as an emotional coping practice, identity negotiation, and socially situated literacy activity. Pedagogically, the study highlights the importance of reflection-based writing instruction, gradual genre scaffolding, and privacy-preserving fictionalization strategies in supporting creative literacy development among adolescent learners in boarding-school settings.

This study is limited by its relatively short research duration, small case-study sample, and reliance on self-reported perceptions. Therefore, the findings should be interpreted as contextual and exploratory rather than generalizable. Future studies may extend the duration of diary observations, incorporate comparative educational settings, and examine the effectiveness of explicit genre-based interventions in improving narrative writing competence.

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