

AUTOMATIC WRITING

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Primary Disciplinary Field(s): Psychology, Spiritualism, Art and Literature (Surrealism)

1. Core Definition

Automatic writing, known technically as automatism or psychography, is defined as the process of producing written text without the conscious direction or active intent of the author. It constitutes a form of **dissociative experience** wherein the motor function required for handwriting or typing operates independently of the individual's central executive consciousness. In its purest form, the subject engaging in automatic writing may report complete unawareness that their hand is moving, or even that they are producing coherent linguistic output. The defining characteristic is the absence of focused attention; the act of writing is relegated to an unconscious or subconscious process, making the resulting text a purported pathway for accessing material typically sequestered from the conscious mind. This phenomenon moves beyond simple distraction, representing a temporary partition of cognitive resources where the linguistic and motor centers function autonomously.

The core premise underpinning the psychological understanding of automatic writing is the concept of a fragmented or tiered consciousness. Psychological definitions emphasize that this activity taps into suppressed memories, latent feelings, or internal conflicts that the conscious ego has either repressed or failed to acknowledge. The written material produced is often viewed as a symbolic manifestation of these deeper psychological states. For example, during states such as a **hypnotic trance**, the critical filter of the conscious mind is relaxed, allowing sub-personalities or dissociated streams of thought to gain control over the physical mechanisms of writing. The writing hand, in essence, becomes a tool through which the unconscious material flows, bypassing the typical censorship mechanisms that govern conscious verbalization and self-expression.

The resulting script, which can range from illegible scribbles to coherent, narrative structures, is distinct from ordinary writing in its origin, reflecting the idea that "A person engaged in automatic writing lacks awareness that they are even moving the hand by way of **unconscious processes**." This lack of voluntary control distinguishes automatism from intentional creative writing or journaling. The content is considered 'automatic' because it appears to be generated without the author's input regarding style, subject matter, or semantic coherence, often surprising the writer upon later reading.

2. Etymology and Historical Development

The history of automatic writing is deeply intertwined with 19th-century movements in spiritualism, parapsychology, and early dynamic psychology. Prior to its formal psychological classification,

automatic writing was widely popularized within the Spiritualist movement, flourishing particularly in the United States and Europe during the mid-to-late 1800s. Spiritualists interpreted the phenomenon not as a psychological dissociation, but as a form of **mediumship**, where the writer served as a conduit for communication from deceased spirits or otherworldly entities. This interpretation often led to the production of extensive theological, philosophical, or prophetic texts attributed to non-physical authors. Devices such as the planchette (a small board mounted on casters used for writing) or the Ouija board were often employed to facilitate this alleged spectral communication.

Simultaneously, the nascent field of psychology began investigating automatic writing, seeking scientific explanations for the phenomena previously attributed to the occult. Pioneer psychologists, most notably Pierre Janet and Frederic W. H. Myers, recognized automatism as a crucial example of psychological dissociation. Janet, in particular, viewed automatic writing as a symptom of hysteria or psychological trauma, wherein certain clusters of ideas or memories were split off from the main stream of consciousness and found expression through motor activity. His work provided a foundation for understanding automatism not as supernatural input, but as an output mechanism for the subconscious.

By the early 20th century, the concept migrated into the domain of artistic theory. The Surrealist movement, led by André Breton, embraced automatic writing (and related processes like automatic drawing) as a revolutionary technique for creative production. They saw it as a method to bypass rational control and tap directly into the source of creativity--the subconscious--in alignment with Freudian principles. This artistic adoption helped solidify the concept's place outside strictly pathological or parapsychological frameworks, recognizing its potential for authentic, unmediated expression.

3. Psychological Mechanism and Theories

The psychological mechanism underlying automatic writing is primarily explained through theories of **dissociation** and the **ideomotor effect**. Dissociation, in this context, refers to a lack of normal integration of thoughts, feelings, or experiences into the stream of consciousness. When engaged in automatic writing, the motor control required for forming letters and words is thought to be dissociated from the central awareness, becoming controlled instead by a subordinate or non-conscious mental structure. This allows the expression of material--often emotionally charged or highly symbolic--that would otherwise be filtered or rejected by the conscious, self-monitoring ego.

The ideomotor effect provides a physical explanation for the movement involved. This effect describes how mental imagery or ideas (*ideo*) can unconsciously trigger muscular movements (*motor*). For instance, if a subject holds the unconscious thought of a specific word or sentence, the physical action of writing that word can occur without the subject making a deliberate,

conscious decision to move the muscles of the hand and wrist. This process is evident in similar phenomena, such as dowsing or the movement of the pointer on a Ouija board, where subtle, unconscious muscular responses are amplified into visible actions. The writing, therefore, is not directed by an external entity, but by the subject's own latent thoughts.

Furthermore, psychoanalytic theories, heavily influenced by Sigmund Freud, interpret automatic writing as a form of "return of the repressed." If traumatic memories or unacceptable impulses are actively pushed out of conscious awareness, they may seek alternative, disguised routes for expression. Automatic writing serves as one such outlet, providing the therapist or the individual with indirect access to these repressed materials. The content often requires careful interpretation, much like dream analysis, due to its highly symbolic, fragmented, or highly condensed nature, characteristic of primary process thinking.

4. Clinical and Therapeutic Applications

In clinical settings, particularly in forms of psychotherapy such as **hypnotherapy**, automatic writing has been utilized as a diagnostic and therapeutic tool. Its primary value lies in its potential to bypass the client's cognitive defenses and intellectualized resistance. When a client is unable or unwilling to consciously verbalize painful or embarrassing material, inducing a hypnotic state and encouraging automatic writing can provide the therapist with direct access to the client's unconscious narratives. This is particularly useful in treating dissociative disorders, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), and severe anxiety, where the core conflict is often shielded from conscious recollection.

The process allows the therapist to gain crucial insights into the client's inner world, including their view of traumatic events, underlying emotional schemas, and relationships with significant others, all without the interference of conscious self-censorship. The material gathered through automatic writing can then serve as a starting point for dialogue, allowing the therapist to carefully introduce and process the unconscious content once it has been externalized and documented. This technique transitions the material from an internalized, repressed state to an external, discussable artifact.

Additionally, automatic writing can be employed as a self-help or cathartic technique. By encouraging clients to engage in "free writing" without filtering or judgment, they can experience emotional release and gain self-awareness. Though not strictly automatic writing in the dissociative sense, this adapted practice shares the goal of circumventing conscious thought patterns to unlock deeper emotional truths. The act itself can be empowering, allowing the client to recognize that previously hidden parts of their psyche have the ability to communicate and express themselves, paving the way for eventual integration of dissociated material.

5. Manifestations in Art and Literature

Automatic writing achieved its most famous cultural application within the 20th-century artistic movements, specifically **Surrealism**. The Surrealists, viewing the subconscious mind as the wellspring of true artistic genius, adopted automatism as a foundational methodology. André Breton, in his Surrealist Manifestos, explicitly advocated for automatic writing as a means of liberating language from the constraints of logic, morality, and aesthetic conventions. The aim was to achieve a "pure psychic automatism," through which thoughts could be transcribed directly as they emerged, free from rational revision.

This approach led to texts characterized by illogical juxtapositions, rapid shifts in imagery, and a dreamlike narrative structure. Notable practitioners included Breton himself, Robert Desnos, and Philippe Soupault, whose collaborative work, *The Magnetic Fields* (1920), is a landmark example of automatic prose. They believed that this technique transcended mere craftsmanship, producing works that were more authentic, radical, and reflective of the human condition than conventionally structured literature. Automatic methods were seen as a political and cultural weapon against bourgeois sensibility and rationalism.

Beyond Surrealism, related techniques have influenced modern poetic forms and stream-of-consciousness narrative structures. While later authors often integrate conscious editing and structural choices, the initial impetus--the rapid, unfiltered transcription of inner monologue--owes a significant debt to the principles established by automatism. In visual arts, the related concept of automatic drawing, where the artist allows the hand to move freely across the paper, similarly seeks to uncover forms and structures generated by the non-conscious mind, reinforcing the interdisciplinary nature of the concept.

6. Debates and Criticisms

Automatic writing has historically faced significant criticism from scientific, psychological, and literary perspectives, primarily concerning the authenticity of its unconscious origins and the interpretation of its content. A major scientific critique centers on the possibility of **fraud or self-deception**. In the context of spiritualism, many famous cases of automatic writing were later exposed as hoaxes or intentional fabrications designed to deceive the public or exploit religious belief. Even in non-spiritual contexts, critics argue that what appears to be unconscious writing is merely rapid, unfocused, conscious writing--a form of distraction where the writer is simply not paying close attention to the content being produced, rather than being truly dissociated from the motor act.

Furthermore, psychological debates question the depth and nature of the material revealed. Skeptics argue that the content generated is often banal, repetitive, or derivative, suggesting it stems not from the deep, repressed unconscious (as defined by psychoanalysis), but from pre-

conscious or peripheral awareness--ideas recently encountered, culturally familiar tropes, or surface-level anxieties. The inherent difficulty in objectively verifying the origin of the written material means that interpreting automatic writing remains highly subjective, relying heavily on the interpretive framework (e.g., psychoanalytic, spiritual, or aesthetic) applied by the observer.

From a clinical standpoint, while beneficial as a projective technique, its diagnostic utility is debated. The material produced is rarely straightforward and requires careful validation against other clinical data. Reliance solely on automatic writing for diagnosis or therapeutic direction can lead to misinterpretation or the introduction of the therapist's own biases into the reading of the text. Ultimately, automatic writing remains a fascinating but highly contested phenomenon, existing at the blurred boundary between conscious intention, psychological dissociation, and cultural performance.

Further Reading

[Automatic writing \(Wikipedia\)](#)

[Surrealism \(Britannica\)](#)

[The Ideomotor Effect \(Psychology Today\)](#)