Having students write about their anxiety before a high-stakes test, for 10 minutes, can reduce or eliminate the performance loss caused by nerves, a new study finds (Ramirez, G., & Beilock, S., January, 2011 in Science).

College students were given a challenging math test involving a subject they had not encountered before, but whose rules could be learned quickly. Then they learned they would win $10 if they increased their score on a second test, and that their performance would also determine whether another student got $10. To add to the pressure, they would be videotaped and their methods evaluated.

Before Test 2, the students either sat quietly for 10 minutes or wrote about what they were feeling. The nonwriters “choked” the researchers said, with their scores dropping by 12% but those who wrote about their anxiety raised their scores by 4%. Also, in field studies in real high school biology classes, students with high test anxiety scored the equivalent of B+ on a final exam when they did the writing exercise, and B- when they did not.