

Basic Guidelines for Reflective Journaling

- ⇒ Journaling can be a creative and therapeutic way to unpack how you are feeling or what you have experienced. Journaling offers the chance for self-exploration, understanding, catharsis, compassion and empathy; for the emergence of inner trust and wisdom; for 'lost' or forgotten parts of yourself to speak, and much more besides. Best of all, there is no 'right' or 'wrong' way of doing it – the rules, if any, are of your own making.
- ⇒ Journals may be kept daily, bi-weekly, weekly, or simply whenever you like (say after a particular experience that has stayed with you or in a time of stress/crisis – or just whenever the mood takes you and it feels right). Find what suits you best and work with that, rather than being overly regimented, otherwise it may just feel like a chore you end up resenting!
- ⇒ Journaling can be very useful for processing emotionally heavy/complex material but it can also be used to document and explore moments of joy, gratitude, love, friendship... A balance of experiences in your journal can mirror the natural ebb and flow of life, with room for both the good times and the hard ones.
- ⇒ Experiment with what works for you in terms of when/where/how you journal. Some may prefer to write in complete solitude at home, others will find a personal space in a public setting like a park or café more them. Some will only ever journal in a physical notebook, others will favour a laptop, and still others will be happy to choose whichever medium feels right in the moment. Your journaling preferences may evolve as you do. Whatever route you choose, as with any private diary you may want to keep your journal in a safe place or password-protect if typing.
- ⇒ There are all kinds of visually beautiful journals and fancy pens available to buy but remember it's ultimately what you put in it that counts, not what it looks like on the outside – if a plain old copybook and a Bic pen works for you, then go for it! In fact it's probably best *not* to choose a journal that you feel is 'too good' to put your pen to.
- ⇒ If you are more at home using your mobile, you could download a journaling app such as *Day One*. For some people this will replace more traditional journaling methods entirely. Others may use an app for shorter, more 'in the moment' entries/observations whilst on the move, as well as maintaining a separate pen and paper/laptop journal for longer, more in-depth exploration.

- ⇒ If you are new to journaling and unsure of how to start, you may find it less intimidating to set a timer for a relatively short period of time, say 10 or 15 minutes, and not put yourself under any pressure to continue writing once the time is up. Once you are more in the routine of journaling, you will likely find it easier to write for longer, if that's what you want/need.
- ⇒ Some people find it useful to sit quietly for a few moments before writing, perhaps doing some mindfulness breathing exercises to centre themselves, if this is something that works for you and that you enjoy.
- ⇒ If you are in the mood to write but the words aren't coming, you might consider using a 'sentence stem' as a springboard. With this simple technique you write the beginnings of a sentence at the top of the page and then 'free-write' whatever flows out of you in response to it for 5 or 6 minutes, without stopping or censoring in any way. You may then feel more switched on to write more or change topic.

Some potential stems you could use to get going:

I wonder...	I wish...	I never...
I used to...	I remember...	I started...
If only...	Mornings are...	The sky was...

- ⇒ The number of pages written may not always reflect productive reflection or learning – quality, not quantity is sometimes the way, and a shorter, more potent entry may contain more insight than a longer one if the latter is merely 'going through the motions.'
- ⇒ Moments of inspiration for integrating what you have felt or experienced may arise at any time, so if needs be make a quick mental or written note to explore something further the next time you are journaling. Some people even keep a pen and paper by their beds so they can quickly make note of details from their dreams that can be reflected on later.
- ⇒ There are many different styles of journaling and none should be seen as 'better' than the other – be creative and follow whatever format fits **your** needs. Some possible formats include:

- 📖 Prose or diary style.
 - 📖 Stream of consciousness (writing whatever comes into your head without censoring... What would it be like to write what you *really* feel or would *really* like to say?).
 - 📖 Bullet point/list format, or using a series of headings/posing a series of questions to yourself.
 - 📖 Mind-mapping and ‘spidergrams’ (putting a word or idea in the middle of the page and spontaneously noting what word associations jump out from it, like branches).
 - 📖 Unsent letters and dialogues (with a person, a place, an emotion, a body part, an illness/health condition... What would you really like to say to this person/thing? What might they reply?).
 - 📖 Inclusion of poems / song lyrics / paintings / drawings / photographs / screengrabs.
 - 📖 The books listed at the end of this sheet will give you more info on possible approaches and techniques. This area is a personal and professional passion of mine, so I can also help steer you towards potentially useful exercises.
- ⇒ Ultimately a journal is a resource for you to connect with yourself and your interior world, so it’s worth remembering that it really is for **you** and no one else. Try and free yourself of any external expectations that you might imagine regarding ‘acceptable’ content, including any perfectionistic tendencies around ‘proper’ presentation and spelling/grammar – self-censorship is not your friend here and your writing can be as neat and tidy or messy and chaotic-looking as you want. This may vary from entry to entry depending on where you are in that moment, and that’s okay.
- ⇒ Give yourself permission to be as open and honest with your feelings as possible and see where it takes you, especially if this is something you find challenging. If you ever find yourself getting overwhelmed, remember that you can simply stop writing. In such cases, the support of a friend/family member/counsellor may be useful to talk about what came up for you.

Selected further reading on Journaling and Reflective Writing

Kay Adams. (1990). *Journal to the self: Twenty-two paths to personal growth*. Warner Books

Gillie Bolton. (2014). *The writer’s key: Introducing creative solutions for life*. Jessica Kingsley Publishers

Tristine Rainer. (2004). *The new diary: How to use a journal for self-guidance and expanded creativity*. Penguin