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# A Total Beginner's Guide to Keeping a Journal

By Kristin Wong



STYLE | SELF | CULTURE | POWER



for gaps: In one entry,  
I have a crush on Justin,

the kid who sits behind me in biology. Today, my journal and I are something like estranged acquaintances, who check in every now and then just to keep in touch, without really understanding why. *Yep*, we say to each other in passing, *everything's good. Hope all is well with you!*

And yet I'd like to be the kind of person who keeps a record of her life. It would be nice to relive those moments at some point in the future. Beyond that, there's also wealth of evidence to suggest that writing regularly can improve your mental, and even physical, health. In one recent study, for example, people who wrote about a breakup were better able to cope with the heartache; in another, those who wrote down their worries were rewarded with reduced anxiety. "Believe it or not, when study subjects wrote about their problems, it reduced stress, and that helped their bodies recover more quickly from injury," Eric Barker, author of the new popular psychology book *Barking Up the Wrong Tree*, told me, citing a study published in the *British Journal of Health Psychology*.

The benefits of journaling are well documented, but one might be curious about *how* to journal in the first place. What do you write about? Is your journal supposed to be a simple recap of your day or an essay about your emotions? These seem like painfully obvious questions, but the answers can vary and figuring out what works for you will make your journaling more effective.

## Step 1: Decide What to Write About

In order to figure this out, you'll have to answer why you want to keep a journal in a first place. If you're keeping a journal for a practical purpose — to remember events about your day or at work (work journals can be useful when it comes time to negotiate a raise) — then the answer is simple: Write down the events of your day. And yet in order to reap the full benefits of journaling, you'll have to dig deeper than that. Consider a 2005 study, for example, that found that expressive writing — that is, exploring your thoughts and feelings while telling a story — led to emotional and physical health benefits. In the paper, the study's authors explain that "the whole point is to bring up issues that are emotionally charged." Here's one writing prompt from that study:

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For the next 4 days, I would like you to write your very deepest thoughts and feelings about the most traumatic experience of your entire life or an extremely important emotional issue that has affected you and your life. In your writing, I'd like you to really let go and explore your deepest emotions and thoughts. You might tie your topic to your relationships with others, including parents, lovers, friends or relatives; to your past, your present or your future; or to who you have been, who you would like to be or who you are now. You may write about the same general issues or experiences on all days of writing or about different topics each day.

The researchers told participants not to worry about spelling, grammar or sentence structure. The only rule they had to follow was to continue writing until time was up. Thus, if you want to extract the mental and physical health benefits of writing, you'll want to write expressively.

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“Redemptive narratives” might also help get through emotional distress, as suggested in a [2014 study](#) published in the *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*. Researchers found that when subjects wrote in “a form of narrative focused on positive outcomes in negative situations,” they reported a decrease in emotional distress.

Ultimately, to get the full emotional benefit of journaling, it's best to tell a narrative, not just recap your day, and write through your emotions. Write about a few things that happened during the day and, more importantly, how those events, epiphanies, or interactions made you feel. If you're trying to journal your way through distress, it may help to focus your writing on positive outcomes as well.

The blank page can be intimidating, though. To get used to the habit, Barker recommends starting small. “Use a technique that Stanford professor BJ Fogg calls ‘minimum viable effort,’” he said. “The important thing with building a habit is being consistent. So start with the absolute minimum amount of work — a ridiculously low amount — so that you have no excuse

to not be consistent.” In practice, this might be as simple as writing one sentence a day, then working your way to more. “Just one sentence. There’s no excuse not to do that,” Barker said. “Once you manage a sentence a day for a week, try two sentences. Still incredibly easy. And slowly keep increasing the amount as you strengthen the habit.”

If the idea of recapping the emotions of your day seems like too much, you could even just start a gratitude journal, which is a simple, daily list of things you’re grateful for: a cup of peppermint tea, sunny mornings, comfortable slippers. In *Thanks! How the New Science of Gratitude Can Make You Happier*, author Robert Emmons, a researcher from the University of California, Davis, said that study participants felt more optimistic and happier about their lives after writing just a few sentences about gratitude each week.

## Step 2: Know Your Purpose

Some people prefer to write in the morning; others at night. There’s conflicting research over which time of day is better for creativity, productivity, or emotional well-being, which ultimately means that the best time of day to write is the time that suits your own peak hours and the purpose of your journaling. (Also, there’s no reason you can’t write in the middle of the day — on your lunch break, for instance!)

For creativity, many writers and entrepreneurs are a fan of “morning pages,” a concept popularized by author Julia Cameron. Morning pages are three pages of stream-of-consciousness writing, written first thing in the morning. The idea is to simply write whatever is on your mind, without much thought or planning, so that you can tap into your mind’s creativity before you “wake up” with the day’s anxieties, which can hinder your creative flow.

If the purpose of your journal is to release your nagging thoughts, you might want to write before bed instead, so you can transfer those thoughts out of your head and onto paper. On the other hand, you might find this keeps you up, in which case, you could choose to write in your journal throughout the day, when those thoughts begin to itch. Trial and error works, too. Try writing in the morning for a week. If it’s not working for you, switch to another time of day and see if you fare better.

Whatever time of day you choose, keep your journal in an easy-to-reach spot, which should serve as a visual reminder to keep up with your writing. Plus, it’s one less excuse when it’s time to write.

## Step 3: Choose a Medium

The next step is to pick a medium that works for you best, whether it's your computer, an app on your phone, or old-fashioned pen and paper. Apps and computers are more convenient (and probably what you're already used to writing with), but there's some evidence to suggest writing by hand may be a better option.

In 2012 research from Indiana University, psychologist Karin James studied kids who were learning different shapes and letters. "The experiments run like this: we do a pretraining fMRI scan and measure how the children brains respond to letters, shapes, digits, and noise," James said. "Then we train them either through the 'see and say' method, what usually is used in preschool, typing on a keyboard, or hand-printing the letters of the alphabet."

From there, James and her colleagues conducted another scan, similar to the first, then compared the results. "There are few differences after 'see and say' or typing, but after printing, there are large differences in regions of the brain that are later used for reading," she said.

In other words, the study discovered that children were better able to process letters and read successfully through handwriting. Similar research found that when children wrote by hand, they also wrote faster and were able to express more ideas. This suggests there are cognitive benefits to writing by hand, namely, it may help us process and understand concepts better. So when you're writing expressively to process your emotions, doing it by hand might be better for actually understanding those emotions. In another study on the emotional benefits of writing, UCLA researcher Matthew D. Lieberman told the *Guardian* that the calming effects of journaling were more effective when subjects wrote by hand. As one Yale psychologist told the *New York Times*, "With handwriting, the very act of putting it down forces you to focus on what's important. Maybe it helps you think better."

But what really matters here is that you'll keep up the habit. Typing or even using a journaling app on your phone might feel more convenient or comfortable for you, so if that medium fits your lifestyle best and helps you journal regularly, by all means, do what works for you.

Finally, don't let perfect become the enemy of good. Your journal doesn't have to be brimming with profound thoughts and experiences, so try to separate your urge to edit from your desire to write. "Your brain does not work in flow mode and edit mode at the same time, so if you're trying to make the writing good or to edit it as you put it on the page, you will be pinching off

the flow at the same time,” said author Tara-Nicholle Nelson, who also hosts her own 30-day writing challenge. “Give yourself permission to write poorly.”

“Write bullet point lists, meander, write nonsense and the like, only then will your nervous system realize it is being allowed to truly down-regulate and relax,” said Nelson. “And then you’ll find yourself having all sorts of insights and fun and flow in your daily writing.”

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