



# Journaling for Personal Well-Being

By Samuel J. Ayers

Samuel J. Ayers prepares elementary and secondary teachers and principals in the Lubbock Christian University School of Education. He taught in San Antonio (Alamo Heights ISD) and Lubbock before serving as a principal and associate superintendent in Lubbock ISD. He can be reached at sam.ayers@LCU.edu.

**Abstract:** Journaling can be a tool for improved mental health during a time when the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for educators both professionally and personally. The author discusses the many types of journals that writers might choose to keep, including an exercise journal, bullet journal, free writing journal, gratitude journal, travel journal, reflective journal, and prayer journal. The author also provides suggestions for getting started, including using prompts, setting aside time each day, and considering digital options for those who prefer technology to writing by hand. Reflective thinking is critical to a teacher's effectiveness and learning, and journaling regularly can provide support in these areas. Teachers who see the benefit in their own lives are more apt to introduce the practice and benefits to their students.

**Keywords:** journaling, types of journals, writing, self-reflection, journaling apps

Strength and resilience have taken on additional meaning as the COVID-19 pandemic created challenging times across the nation and around the world. As educators knew they must help their students navigate online learning, they simultaneously—along with a myriad other adults—rediscovered how the application of journal-writing strategies allowed for the processing of a range of emotions and the creation of greater self-awareness.

In the Hallmark movie *Five More Minutes* (Cooper & Hayter, 2021), a young woman misses her grandfather who recently died and wishes she had just a little more time with him. But she discovers his journal that he began writing after high school, throughout his military service, and upon returning home. It is through reading her grandfather's journal that she gains new insights into his life experiences, his struggles, and his character.

In the Sony Pictures release *A Journal for Jordan* (Black et al., 2021), a soldier deployed to Iraq writes a journal of advice to his infant son. The writings create an avenue for providing his son with information about his father's background and beliefs while also conveying messages of encouragement and love.

A common theme in these two films is journaling. Ackerman (2018) suggests that the very use of the word *journaling* for most people conjures images of middle-schoolers making diary entries to deal with adolescent drama. But journaling is a tool that can be employed by adults. In fact, across time, famous people have used journals: Leonardo da Vinci (inventor/artist), Frida Kahlo (artist), John D. Rockefeller (businessman), Marie Curie (scientist), Samuel Clemens (author), Thomas Edison (inventor), John Steinbeck

(author), George Marshall (General), George Patton (General), George Lukas (film director and producer), and Oprah Winfrey (actress and talk show host), among many, many others (Prichard, 2015). Even this brief list of people representing a range of careers and interests validates the use of journaling in more than an educational setting.

### What Is Journaling?

To define journaling, one must first define *journal*. Simply put, a journal is a record that accounts for any number of experiences, events, observations, wonderings, and the like. So, journaling is the act of using a journal for a personal means. Levesley (2021) suggests it is expressing your thoughts and feelings with words or illustrations and can include documenting personal goals or reflecting on people, interactions, and events. A journal can also contain a to-do list. Spelling and grammar are not a concern. The purpose is to capture personal, reflective thoughts or creative ideas.

### Why Journal?

The benefits of journaling are typically related to the emotional well-being of the writer. Ackerman (2018) indicates this kind of writing can serve as a helpful tool for reducing stress, managing anxiety, or working through depression. The act of writing in this manner has the potential to identify personal fears or problems with possible solutions. Additionally, positive self-messaging can be experienced through journaling and reflecting on the writing.

Dr. Stuart Spendlove (personal communication, December 30, 2021), a clinical psychologist and an adjunct professor at Brigham Young University, stated,

Journaling is particularly helpful for individuals with anxiety and depression. Asking a client to journal their worries or other negative thought content related to sadness, worry, rumination, etc., helps unload the mind. Our minds are like cups or other vessels with limited capacities. When the vessel is full of negative thoughts and worries, there is little room left for the mind to function properly—that is, attention, concentration, logic all spill over and get lost because the cup is full of the negative stuff. Journaling allows a person to put on paper what has been circulating in the mind and thereby free up some space in the mind to concentrate on other things—sleep, daily living activities, tests, lectures, performances, etc.

Skip Prichard (2015), a corporate senior leader and a business speaker, recognizes the benefits of journaling for self-awareness, but he primarily utilizes it to enhance his leadership. He believes this method of reflective writing can result in improved demeanor, better organization, and enhanced decision-making. He encourages business leaders to write in the morning before starting their daily work activities.

Dr. Carlos Perez (personal communication, December 28, 2021), a Lubbock Christian University professor and the chair of the Psychology and Counseling Department, journals regularly. When asked about his motivation for journaling, he stated,

I use it to process, think, and work through any experiences or feelings I'm working through. When I'm stressed or anxious, I use it to put my feelings and thoughts on paper, which externalizes my experience. Once it's on paper, I can separate myself from my stress and think through it with a clearer mind.

Dr. Perez clearly demonstrates the function of using journaling to manage important issues causing stresses in life. There may be a multitude of reasons for journaling, all individualized to the person doing the writing, but the point is the benefit to the writer through the process of journaling. Add to that, there are many ways to journal, which can also impact the effectiveness of the experience of the writer.

### Types of Journals

Journaling does not need to be confined to writing endless paragraphs about daily activities or thoughts. Done in this way creates the possible loss of benefits to the journaling effort. A variety of options are available and can be beneficial depending on the purposes for writing, ranging from recording data, to keeping track of comments, to allowing ideas to flow effortlessly with a stream of consciousness feel, all equally valid and helpful to the writer.

#### Exercise Journal

Barth (2020) writes about the benefits of physical health improvement through the act of writing. Recording baseline data, workout routines, and progress made during exercise can be reviewed to determine what is working and what is challenging. Noting nutritional choices and new recipes can assist with the overall benefits of all aspects impacting exercise. Additionally, Barth stresses that the complexity or simplicity of journal writing is up to the writer. He carries a writing instrument and index card with him so that when he thinks of something he wants to write about, he will not forget. By jotting down those ideas, he then affixes the card to a larger notebook to keep for future reference.

Personally, I first stumbled into an exercise journal while recording my high school workouts and mile times during track season. As an adult, I have revisited the exercise journal since my last doctor visit when he suggested I lose weight. The entries did not begin as a positive experience, but I am anticipating an eventual benefit to the reflective process this time around.

#### Free Writing Journal

Free writing and stream of consciousness writing are often used interchangeably. Peterman (2020) describes this writing style as completely unedited and unstructured in nature.

There are no rules or guidelines. Simply writing thoughts as they come to mind is called free writing. When a structured approach is difficult, a less formal approach can validly start the writing process effectively. Kay Valek, my ninth-grade English teacher, introduced our class to this style of journaling by beginning each class with ten minutes of free writing in spiral notebooks. Initially, this was a painful exercise for me since I did not find writing to be an enjoyable experience, but appreciation followed as the year passed. Eventually, the practice of free writing in a journal allowed me to explore my interest in certain topics and activities, even leading to learning about photography and trying distance running, two of several passions I have been pursuing for years now.

#### Gratitude Journal

Keeping a gratitude journal involves noting the good things experienced with the hope of reducing the tendency to focus on the negative. A daily recollection of positive experiences or things thankful for from throughout the day tends to foster genuine appreciation. While this can be a dedicated format, I typically



incorporate this type of writing as part of my other journaling experiences. Perhaps the most vocal proponent of the gratitude journal was Oprah Winfrey, who often spoke on her television show about her own love for reflective writing, and she encouraged viewers to adopt the regular practice of keeping a gratitude journal.

### **Travel Journal**

Although travel continues to be impacted by the global health issues, keeping a written and visual record during travel of people encountered and places visited—including a scrapbook dimension with the addition of collected programs, tickets, maps, and other items related to the experiences—can enrich those travel experiences even after the journey has been completed. The travel journal can address local visits to points of interest (e.g., parks, exhibits, parades, performances, movies) or travel to distant locations. My own travel journals resemble the scrapbook format, while my wife describes places visited each day along with specific descriptions and feelings associated with restaurants and points of interest.

### **Reflective Journal**

Reflective writing requires focusing on the significant events and experiences in life. These can be distant or recent, facilitating the contemplation and recording of lessons learned. Educators who use reflective journaling do so for a variety of reasons, personal and professional. The benefits include adding a perspective that facilitates objective problem-solving and considering how to best meet the needs of specific students. Additionally, reflective journaling as a process for students offers an opportunity to practice metacognition in a way that our often turbulent and noisy lives don't allow. Both Skip Prichard's (2015) and Carlos Perez's (2021) use of journaling could be considered reflective since they both describe the personal and professional benefits they experienced. My own use of reflective journaling led to further developing some of the ideas in those entries to be stories I shared with family members. In fact, I maintained a collection of letters that I presented to each of my daughters upon their graduation from college. Another

collection of reflective childhood experiences and lessons learned was presented to my grandchildren.

### **Prayer Journal**

There is nothing more personal than a prayer journal since it encompasses the spiritual side of human nature. A journal such as this can include scripture references or thoughts from meditation and prayer. Specific prayer concerns are often the focus. Personal prayer journal entries typically list or describe people or situations of concern that are later included as parts of prayers or meditation. My wife records key words or phrases about the characteristics of God and an abbreviated daily prayer list of people with issues that come to mind. Answers to prayers often surface as part of this practice. Even though public schools in the United States embrace separation of religion and school, in these challenging times of the pandemic-caused uncertainty, this kind of relative journaling can offer solace to the writer on deeply personal levels.

### **Helping Strategies for Journaling**

Key to the success of journaling for personal or professional use is the method that works best for the situation in which it will be practiced. Once the educator knows when to write and how to approach it for the most impact, the practice of journaling can be used as a teaching and learning strategy with consistency. As someone decides to use journaling for increased health benefits, learning about how to search for and use the method that works best is key. Mentioned in this section are some of the ways journaling can be started.

### **Prompts**

A prompt is a statement or thought that encourages or launches the writing process. Sometimes it is helpful to begin writing with a specific prompt. These prompts can be personally developed and used as needed, but some journal writers might seek motivation to write using prompts from other sources. Naujalyte (2018) provides 75 quality prompts and Petruska (n.d.) provides 65 interesting

prompts for consideration. These and other sources found easily in online magazine articles and blogs provide options for the journal writer who wants or needs a prompt to start journaling.



### When and How to Journal

Scheduling 10-15 minutes for journaling daily is helpful, especially in a comfortable and calming spot away from the busyness of the day. Write or draw what comes to mind or use a chosen prompt. Think of journaling as an internal conversation. Important to realize is that writing by hand or drawing is preferable to using a computer or iPad as the slower and effortful act of writing by hand seems to force the brain to better engage with the information being processed. Technology may impact the efficiency of producing writing, but the purpose of journaling is not as much for efficiency as it is for the benefits of reflection and other positive outcomes, so writing by hand is definitely worthy of serious consideration.

### Digital Options

In the hectic world in which we find ourselves, there are those who are just much more comfortable with technology applications (apps) than with pen and paper. Journaling apps are available for iOS and Android users who fit this description. Additionally, Pot (2022) highlights and provides pricing for the most popular apps. These include Day One for Mac and iOS users, Diarium for Windows users, Momento for social media users, Grid Diary for templated users, Five Minute Journal for beginners, Dabble Me for journaling over emails, and Daylio for “non-writers.” Most cost \$3-\$5 per month, and some have pricing for a full year. The variety available for those who are technology skilled and interested means that users can likely find an app that is best suited to them as writers.

### Reflective Practice

Given the emotional benefits, journaling can be beneficial to teachers personally and professionally. Educators are trained professionals entrusted with tremendous responsibility, accountability, and ethical constraints. As professional practitioners, teachers are expected to improve their effectiveness and enhance learning experiences for their students, and maintaining a reflective practice through journaling can help teachers meet those expectations. Osterman (1990) revisited the research of Donald Schön and noted that skilled practitioners reflect on their practice, which is a key ingredient to their professional growth. This belief is reflected in T-TESS, the current formal teacher evaluation system, as educators are expected to complete a post-conference self-reflective piece as part of the evaluation cycle. Furthermore, when teachers view

journaling based on their own experience as an effective learning tool, they are likely more committed to introducing reflective writing as a regular practice for their students.

### Final Thoughts

Ultimately, journaling is an individual and private activity for personal benefit. Dealing with stress, turning inward, and thinking more clearly (e.g., Ackerman, 2018; Barth, 2020; Pritchard, 2015) are just a few of the many benefits associated with reflective journal writing. That there are many types of journals means that selecting the right journal for a journal writer’s specific purpose and aim is important to make the experience the most effective and convenient. The act of journaling has the potential to impact daily life in the most positive of ways, especially during challenging times like these. Committing to the journaling process may be an activity worth considering as an investment in mental and physical health with multiple enduring benefits for both teachers and their students.

### References

- Ackerman, C. E. (2018, May 14). 83 benefits of journaling for depression, anxiety, and stress. *PositivePsychology.com*. <https://positivepsychology.com/benefits-of-journaling/>
- Barth, D. F. (2020, January 18). Journaling isn’t just good for mental health. It might also help your physical health. *NBC News Now*. <https://www.nbcnews.com/think/opinion/journaling-isn-t-just-good-mental-health-it-might-also-ncna1114571>
- Black, T. (Producer), Washington, D. (Producer), Jordan, M. B. (Producer), Blumenthal, J. (Producer), Tisch, S. (Producer), & Washington, D. (Director). (2021). *A journal for Jordan* [Motion Picture]. Sony Pictures.
- Cooper, C. (Producer) & Hayter, L. L. (Director). (2021). *Five more minutes* [Motion Picture]. Hallmark Movies & Mysteries.
- Levesley, D. (2021, March 7). The eleven steps to becoming a better man via journaling. *GQ*. <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/lifestyle/article/journaling-for-mental-health>
- Naujalyte, B. (2018, June 18). 75 journaling prompts for your best life. *The Bliss Bean*. <https://www.theblissbean.com/blog/2018/6/18/75-journaling-prompts-for-your-best-life>
- Osterman, K. (1990). Reflective practice: A new agenda for education. *Education and Urban Society*, 22(2), 133-152. <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0013124590022002002?journalCode=eusa>
- Peterman, A. (2020, June 2). How to write stream of consciousness. *WikiHow*. <https://www.wikihow.com/Write-Stream-Of-Consciousness>
- Petruska, K. (n.d.). What is journaling? 65 journal ideas, tips & benefits. *Rendezvous*. <https://rendezvousmag.com/what-is-journaling/>
- Pot, J. (2022, April 20). The 8 best journal apps of 2022. *Zapier*. <https://zapier.com/blog/best-journaling-apps/>
- Prichard, S. (2015, March 27). Why journaling makes better leaders. <https://www.skipprichard.com/why-journaling-makes-better-leaders/>