

# Personal Development and Journal Writing

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## Abstract

Journal writing can be self-exploratory and can help individuals in their pursuit of personal development. In this paper, the word “journal” is defined and then four journal writing methods are examined. These journal writing methods and their relationships to personal development are outlined all before one specific writing practice is recommended. It is the author’s hope that this piece will help inspire students and/or scholars to begin a journal writing practice in the language of their choice.

**Key words:** journal writing, personal development, proprioceptive writing

In *The Self on the Page: Theory and Practice of Creative Writing in Personal Development*, authors Celia Hunt and Fiona Sampson define personal development as being “any process of beneficial self-reflexive change which an individual chooses to undertake” (p. 200). They then claim that this definition includes “practices which develop personal confidence as well as obviously self-exploratory work” (p. 200). Various forms of journal writing are indeed self-exploratory and thus can help individuals in their pursuit of personal development. In this essay, I will first define the word “journal” and then evaluate four methods of journal writing. I will explain how these methods relate to personal development and conclude with my own recommendations for a journal writing practice. It is my hope that this piece will help inspire students and/or scholars to begin a journal writing practice in the language of their choice.

## Defining a Journal

There are a variety of different journal writing methods, some with very few rules, and others with definite structures and rituals. Despite the differences, most methods revolve around one’s “search for meaning and understanding through the exploration and development of self” (Chew, p. 1). Furthermore, “personal journal writing, whether it is structured or unstructured, is a means of self-examination” (p. 1). For the purposes of this essay, a journal will be defined as being “a private book of dated entries kept by an individual over a period of time. Included in these entries are thoughts, reactions, and emotions about oneself, others, events or ideas” (p. 11).

## Journal Writing Methods

One very common method of keeping a journal is often labeled descriptive writing. In this style, an individual uses her journal in an attempt to capture the sights, sounds, smells, tastes and/or emotions that she experiences at a particular moment. In *The Therapeutic Potential of Creative Writing: Writing Myself*, author Gillie Bolton describes this method as “a way of extending experience: describing a happy one, for example, can deepen, intensify and prolong it” (p. 41). She then explains that taking the time to write down what one observes, helps an individual sharpen senses and maintain “essential contact with the world and others” (p. 41). By becoming more aware of one’s surroundings, an individual will also become more aware

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of her own self in relation to these surroundings, which, in turn, places her in a better position to focus on personal development.

Two other techniques involved with journal writing are often referred to as cathartic writing and free-intuitive writing. Cathartic writing allows those who feel like they are unable to express themselves in their daily lives to purge all of their emotions onto the page, essentially giving them an outlet to voice their true feelings and opinions. This form of writing can be painful, but it can also be therapeutic. In *Opening Up: The Healing Power of Confiding in Others*, author James Pennebaker describes a research project that demonstrates this writing style's therapeutic value. He asked participants to write about traumatic experiences while venting their emotions and discovered that this "resulted in improved moods, more positive outlook, and greater physical health" (p. 45). The individuals in this project were asked to vent their emotions in a cathartic manner while writing "continuously for fifteen minutes" (p. 42), which means they also engaged in free and intuitive writing. Free-intuitive writing helps an individual express herself in a manner that requires "letting go of all awareness of grammar, spelling, punctuation and proper form" (Bolton, p. 35). This method requires an individual to write about whatever comes to mind in an unfiltered format, usually for a specified amount of time. Like cathartic writing, free-intuitive writing can be therapeutic and help individuals explore memories that they may or may not be aware of. Bolton writes, "Writing like this can take you into deep waters. It is part of the healing process but can feel uncomfortable or even a bit scary at times" (p. 37). Both cathartic writing and free-intuitive writing can help an individual discover and learn more about her inner feelings, which can and should result in a greater understanding of self.

The final writing method I will discuss in this essay is often called reflective journal writing. "This is the kind of writing that can tell you what you think" (Bolton, p. 43). It is also "an excellent way of sorting out problems" (p. 43), mainly because all "the sides of the argument, or the bits of the dilemma, can be put down and then sorted and weighed" (p. 43). In "Transforming our birth experiences," author Reinekke Lengelle recommends Linda Metcalf and Tobin Simon's Proprioceptive method of journal writing because it encourages reflection and instructs a writer to ask the "proprioceptive" question, "What do I mean by \_\_\_\_\_?" Lengelle writes, "Instead of doing a so-called 'free write' where anything goes and where a writer can vent, journal writing with this type of reflective component, I believe, has more to offer in processing an experience such as birth." From my personal experience, incorporating a question that encourages a person to ask what she really thinks or means, really does help an individual probe for inner thoughts and truths.

Thus far, I have discussed four different methods of journal writing, but as Bolton points out, "There must be as many different kinds of journal/daybook/diary as there are diarists" (p. 32). So, which journaling method helps the most with personal development? Judy Chew answers this question while discussing Tristine Rainer's *The New Diary: How to Use a Journal for Self-guidance and Expanded Creativity* when she states, "Rainer asserts that the individual's discovery of a personal style of journal keeping is a crucial aspect of the self-knowledge derived from the writing process" (p. 23). Author Susan Zimmermann echoes this idea in *Writing to Heal the Soul* and states, "There is no pat formula or one 'right way' to do this kind of writing. It isn't like learning German or calculus" (p. 19). I agree with both of these writers and believe that an individual must discover a method of journal writing that allows her to tell her story, embrace her emotions, and learn all about her inner truths on her own.

### **Potential Drawbacks of Journal Writing**

Despite all of the benefits associated with journal writing, there can also be potential difficulties that hinder positive personal development. In *The New Diary: How to Use a Journal for Self-guidance and Expanded Creativity*, author Tristine Rainer writes, "The abiding danger is that the journal writer may become passive

in life, writing dialogues rather than talking with people, and turn inward rather than take action in the world” (p. 39). A descriptive journal writing practice for example, can help sharpen one’s senses, but if it is practiced compulsively it may actually start isolating an individual from other people. If, for example, a young mother visits the Grand Canyon with her children and uses her private journal in an attempt to capture the feelings or emotions inspired by the views, she may miss out on sharing these emotions with her children. In this case, by trying to intensify a personal moment, the mother could actually be sacrificing a much more precious moment with her children.

In “This was not the birth I had in mind: Transforming our birth experiences through the power of writing,” Lengelle explains that free-intuitive journal writing may also have significant shortcomings. She writes, “My experience with writing in a journal without any guidelines is that there is usually no more than a cathartic effect.” She then explains that this style of writing does allow her to vent her emotions but she questions whether or not it produces any long-term benefits. As far as positive personal development is concerned, surely positive long-term benefits are a result many people are searching for when they choose a particular journal writing method.

Excessive cathartic and reflective writing can also become problematic. When describing this kind of writing, Pennebaker points out that “writing about the source of our problems without self-reflection merely adds to our distress” (p. 203). He then claims that it is possible to focus too much on another person or an event and not actually explore why we feel the way we do, which, if left unchecked, can result in obsessive thinking and destructive behavior. With regard to reflective writing, Pennebaker explains that if “we self-reflect to the point of self-absorption, it becomes maladaptive” (p. 204). If, for example, our journal writing inspires us to become too involved or too addicted to our own stories, it is possible that we will not be empathetic, “a good friend to others, or a useful member of society” (p. 204).

## Recommendations

Although it is up to each individual to discover a journal writing style that best suits his/her individuality, sharing writing ideas provides us with an opportunity to learn and perhaps even adopt new techniques. For me, the ideal journal writing practice combines reflective and free-intuitive writing. Asking a question like “What do I mean by \_\_\_\_\_?” while writing whatever comes to one’s mind, really does help to amplify one’s thought, “express it more accurately, and reflect on it more meaningfully” (Metcalf and Tobin, p. 35). Additionally, while I am aware that many writing practices recommend writing every single day, I, like Pennebaker, “am not convinced that writing about significant experiences needs to be done that frequently” (p. 50). In many cases, writing everyday does seem to help maintain a regular routine, but if such a practice feels too regimented, it may end up stifling creativity and produce work that is forced or unnatural.

Any of the four journal writing methods discussed in this essay can be help with one’s personal development. These writing techniques can lead to fulfilling self-discoveries, but it is also important to remember that they can become counterproductive. “That is, if we can do something to change an unpleasant situation, we are much better off changing it than merely writing about it” (Pennebaker, p. 202). I recommend a self-exploratory journal writing practice, which integrates free-intuitive writing and reflective writing. Of course, this is but one of many journal writing suggestions. The only way for an individual to truly pursue personal development through journal writing is to discover a method that ultimately fits with his/her own character.

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