

Journal Writing: A Way to Improve Your Writing

A journal is private record, written by a person to him- or herself. Journals are *not* diaries. Diaries record daily private thoughts and experiences, but journals, while personal, are not meant to record only feelings. Journals may record feelings, but just as often, they record ideas, information, practice arguments, notes on readings and responses to those readings. Journals can hold anything the writer wants to keep a record of for later use. Journals may be thought of as personal *notebooks*. In fact, class notes are a kind of journal entry. So are notes kept for a particular paper or project.

Journals have been used by serious thinkers, writers, scientists, artists, philosophers, and teachers for centuries. St. Augustine and Jean-Jacques Rousseau based their "confessions" on journals. A small sample of the more prominent people who have kept journals include 18th-Century essayist Samuel Pepys, Thomas Jefferson (as well as most of the other Founding Fathers), 19th-Century American philosophers and writers Ralph Waldo Emerson, Henry David Thoreau, and Nathaniel Hawthorne, Charles Darwin, Sigmund Freud, Albert Einstein, Virginia Woolf, Anais Nin, photographer Edward Weston, and philosopher/novelist Albert Camus.

Students also find that journal writing helps them in their learning. Here's what one student had to say about it:

Writing helps me to understand more what I don't understand about something. When I write something out, it clears my mind You have more than facts. You have what you thought about it. I think it helps me to write the history responses because I remember . . . what I was thinking of as I read it and what it helped me to realize or to make connections or whatever about the topic. And that's more valuable than just taking straight notes because you have more than facts. You have thought about it.

--Jennifer, quoted in "It's Not Just the Writing" by Bernadette Marie Mulholland in *The Journal Book*. Ed. Toby Fulwiler. Portsmouth, NH: Boynton/Cook, Heinemann, 1987. 235.

Some Characteristics of Journals

- Journals preserve thought at a particular moment. They can reveal growth and provide ideas for later consideration. Unlike formal papers, they are not meant to transcend the moment.
- Journals do not read like formal prose—and are not meant to. They may be full of sentence fragments, misspellings, shorthand, sloppy handwriting, self-doubt, digressions, and frequent references to oneself. Errors don't matter in journals, because, after all, they are addressed to the writer him- or herself, not an audience of others.

Journals often involve experimentation with ideas and with language. In fact, they are a great site for just such experimentation.