

JOURNAL



JUMPSTARS

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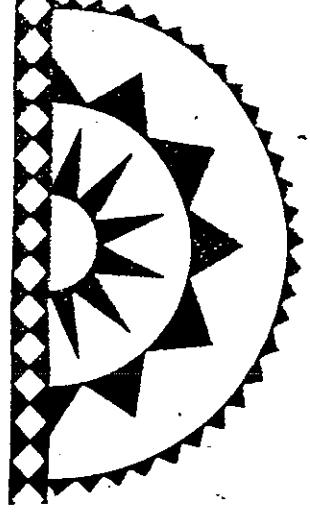
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QUICK TOPICS AND TIPS

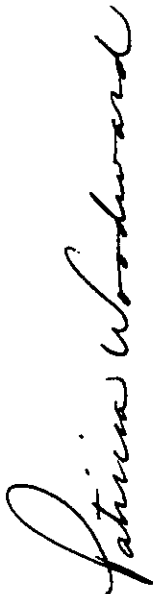
FOR JOURNAL WRITING

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Despite its benefits, many teachers approach the idea of journal-writing with concern, if not outright fear. If you are one of those teachers, relax. Journal writing should not be an intimidating experience for either you or your students. This booklet contains suggestions gleaned from over twenty years of having junior high and high school students keep journals. It is designed to help both the teacher and the student overcome some potential roadblocks to successful journaling.

Feel free to use whatever suggestions you think might be helpful, to change the wording if you think of a better way to phrase an idea, to ignore topics that don't seem to "fit." Whatever you do, I hope the experience of student journal writing is as exciting and rewarding for you and your students as it has always been for me and mine.



Common-sense suggestions for the concerns teachers most often express about using journal writing with teenagers

Why should I ask my students to keep a journal?

Because journals have such personal significance, the benefits of journal-writing are numerous. Your students will experience:

- improved thinking skills
- enjoyment in writing
- involvement in personally meaningful topics
- more dynamic and powerful writing

One of the greatest benefits of the journal is that it gives a teacher the opportunity to give students individual, personalized attention. With classes of 30 students in 45-minute periods, we have all of about one and a half minutes to spend per student per day. That's not much time to focus on the needs of individual students, let alone time to actually get into personal conversations with each of them. The classroom journal provides that time. Dialogue with students through their journals opens up communication in a way that no other vehicle provides.

Who should read the students' journals?

Because you have assigned the journal, you will be expected to read it, but only the student should have the right to allow anyone else to see it, under normal circumstances. Students may ask friends, parents, counselors, and classmates to read certain entries, but because of the personal nature of journals, most young people will share them only with people they really trust. As the students learn to trust your acceptance of their writings, you will see their entries become more detailed and dynamic, and your communication with them will be dramatically enhanced.

Your expectations for journals will be quite different from any other type of assigned writing. Encourage students to play with ideas and with words, to write poems, to even occasionally draw pictures if they want to. The more they explore and experiment, the better, and to focus on errors will only stifle the flow.

Consequently, you will not mark errors in journals, but will instead encourage clear expression. Ask students to dig for ideas and comment to ask for clarification or further exploration, but resist the temptation to "correct" them. If you are fortunate enough to have teacher aides or graders, do not have them help you with journals. For you to allow anyone else to read them while they are in your possession would violate the confidential nature of the journal.

How should I handle confidential information?

Frequently, students will share very confidential information about themselves. You may read not only about their private whimsies, but also about their personal tragedies. This is not, however, the time for you to become a therapist. Every teacher is by definition part counselor, but most of us have professional counselors on staff. I tell my students — before they ever begin writing — that I will never share their journals with anyone else without their knowledge (notice that I did not say "permission") and that I will do so only if they are in danger. I tell them that if I learn, for example, that one of them has been a victim of abuse or is threatening sui-

cide, I will immediately ask that young person to go with me to the counselor to get help. I stress that my position requires that I do so and more importantly, my concern for them demands it.

At the same time, we must also guard against invading the students' privacy. Students can be encouraged to write personally and honestly without being pressured to reveal their most private lives. A diary is a more appropriate place for entries of that nature. Nevertheless, students will, whether deliberately or inadvertently, make us privy to some very personal and confidential information, and we need to be prepared to respond — both lovingly and professionally.

How should I comment?

The most important rule for commenting in students' journals is that you be honest and that you reply directly to them. This is probably the most time-consuming aspect — not the reading so much as the commenting. However, it is the most important aspect. Nothing encourages students to write more than knowing that someone cares what they have to say and will write back. (Think about the unbelievable care they take with notes to each other — nearly always ending with that directive: "write back.")

It is easiest to comment quickly in the margins or at the end of the student's entries, as you read. The comments will typically be brief and positive, encouraging the students, challenging their thinking, or asking for clarification. Don't attempt to comment after every entry, but responding periodically gives you the opportunity to establish that very important dialogue with your students. Many teachers try to make at least one positive comment every time a student's journal is turned in. The comments need not be lengthy, but students do appreciate frequent, direct feedback. (Use any color except red — the psychological response to red ink for most people is to see it as a correction.)

How should I give credit?

Even though you will not be correcting or marking the journals for grades, giving credit for student effort is still

essential. Students need to know that you take their journal writing seriously — that you “count” it. Probably the best way to do this *is* to count it.

Have the students date each entry. Ask them to skip a line at the end of an entry, record the new date, and continue writing to the end of each page, rather than starting a new page each day. Count the pages, giving a specific number of points for each page (ten points per page works well for me).

Yes, some students will suddenly develop huge penmanship, and others will insist that their pages are much longer than the person’s sitting next to them. That’s no problem: the teacher gets to decide what constitutes a page. If a student writes three lines to the page, it might take six or seven pages to equal a “normal” page; however, for one who has very tiny penmanship, one page might be counted as two. Feel free to give extra points for exceptionally fine entries (“This is such a thoughtful observation, it’s worth double points!”).

The teacher always has the final say in determining the acquired points, so you must be especially clear in establishing the minimum required for a given time period. Depending on the age, ability level, time devoted to writing in class and required out-of-class entries, three to five pages a week is probably sufficient.

On the other hand, it is crucial that neither you nor the students become overly concerned with measuring pages. I tell my students that I will “eyeball” the page and decide if it looks like enough to me. I do my best to be consistent, but if a student thinks I have miscounted, we will re-count the pages together. (Here is where it pays to be flexible without being a pushover.) At the end of each counting period, I record the number in ink and circle it. That way, it is easy to know where to start counting from the next time I read.

By the way, some students will become so enamored with their journals that they will write many, many extra pages. I will allow a journal to raise a student’s grade only one full grade, and the extra points count only if all required work is in. However, I will not accept lots of extra pages written the night before grades are due. In order to show real progress and growth, journals should be written over an extended period of time, not all at once.

How can I keep up with the reading?

You can handle the work load of reading journals in several different ways:

- Have only one or two classes keep journals at the same time.
- Have students write regularly, but occasionally take a break. One class might write for a month and then another class write for the next month.
- Alternate due dates for groups of students. Have one class (or one row) turn their journals in on Mondays, another on Tuesdays, etc.
- Be sure students turn in their journals frequently (at least once every two weeks) so that your reading doesn’t pile up.
- Allow students to turn in their journals as frequently as they like with the understanding that you will re-turn them as promptly as possible. That way, students won’t feel they have to wait for an immediate reply when they need one.
- Have students star — or otherwise indicate — entries they particularly want you to read. Then you can quickly read the other entries and focus on the ones that are more important to them.

Should I have any rules about what they write?

Subject matter is another area where you must be somewhat flexible. Sometimes students will do a little testing and write meaningless nonsense, copy lengthy passages from newspapers or magazines, or even try to shock you. Typically, if you don’t over-react, they will soon stop, if only because they just get tired of it. I sometimes point out that the journal is theirs and ask, “Is this what you want it to say

about you?" (True, with some more recalcitrant students, this approach is not always terribly effective.)

Nevertheless, students should be allowed — even encouraged — to express themselves freely, but within the confines of good taste and acceptability. A guideline I use is that the language should be acceptable to the general public: would the local newspaper use similar language? Students should be reassured that their writing will not be judged on mechanics, but will be evaluated for its content. This doesn't mean that they can't say what they want to, but that they should not be offensive in the process.

Spend some time discussing this important aspect of written expression before students begin their journals, but again, don't give it inordinate attention. If a student does engage in inappropriate language, treat it as you would in any other situation: perhaps you will want to discuss it with the student, or perhaps you will choose to ignore it, depending on the severity of the situation. If it continues, establish with that individual the consequences of breaking the "rule of acceptability." Most schools have fairly clear standards of behavior and acceptable language in class, and journals, because they are class assignments, are subject to the same expectations. Students rarely violate the standards in their journals, but if they do, deal with them on an individual basis.

How can I motivate my students to want to keep a journal?

Some students may initially resist the idea of journal writing, mainly because they typically resist anything new. However, if you are enthusiastic about the journal and believe in the benefits of keeping such a record of one's intellectual life, your students will eventually come to appreciate its value. Be careful to explain why you think journal writing is worthwhile and allay their fears by answering their questions before you ask them to begin.

Giving them time to write in class is time well spent. Many students become so involved with their in-class writing that they will take the time to finish an entry at home, but for others class may be the only quiet time they have all day. Ten minutes of journal writing at the beginning of class gives

students a chance to focus and center. It gives the teacher that same chance.

The choice is not whether to write, but what to write. At first, students' writing may be mundane and superficial, but as they become increasingly involved, they will begin to deal more and more with ideas, rather than just talking about people or relating events. I tell my students that what happens is not nearly as important as their reactions to what happens. You may have to walk around and write questions in the margins of some notebooks to give further prodding, but writing such prompts instead of speaking them has double benefits: the room remains silent and the concentration of others is not broken; plus, the very act of *your* writing promotes *their* writing.

How can I deal with complaints?

Students may complain about any number of things at first, but if you keep your perspective, your sense of humor and your conviction that journal writing is a valuable use of instructional time, you will soon win them over. When students forget to bring their journals, just tell them to use a sheet of notebook paper and add it later. When they whine that they don't have a pen, tell them to borrow one (from you, if necessary). When they claim they can't think of anything to say, tell them to write a note to someone — maybe even to you — and then add it to their journal. If they have complaints about other aspects of keeping their journals, have them put their concerns in writing, and then be sure to address their concerns when you comment. The important thing is to keep them writing. Never allow them to just sit. (This is where your creativity gets a workout!) Try to work out solutions with individual students by really listening to what they are saying and helping them overcome their blocks.

Parents may occasionally wonder about why you don't grade journals, but once they understand their purpose, they are usually very supportive. They just need to be reassured that you provide plenty of opportunity elsewhere for composition writing, editing and revision.

Your own family and/or friends may object at first to the added workload for you, but once you get the hang of rotat-

ing the collection, reading for major ideas instead of word-for-word, and commenting succinctly, you will not feel quite so overworked and underpaid, and you *will* have time for a social life!

Where will students get ideas for their journals?

Ideally, students will come up with their own ideas for journal topics, but occasionally even the most articulate writers draw a blank. Just as cars sometimes won't start on cold days because of temporarily "dead" batteries, sometimes students can't get going either. On those days when your students can't come up with an idea of their own, it is helpful to have one written on the chalkboard or on an overhead projection screen at the front of the room. I call these ideas "journal jumpstarts for the temporarily brain-stalled." If they are truly stalled, students may opt to write on the suggested topic. On the next pages is a compilation of ideas which have elicited wonderful responses (some more wonderful than others!) from my students over the years, as well as from the students of other teachers with whom I have shared the ideas. Not every suggestion will inspire every student, but there are ideas that should appeal to a wide range of students who need help.

Feel free to photocopy the ideas for overhead transparencies. I find that it helps to have at least one idea on the overhead screen each day, for every day there is bound to be someone who needs a "jumpstart" for writing.

(Note: Pages 9 - 10 provide a brief summary of the importance of journal writing. They are designed for you to photocopy and pass out to your students.)

Why keep a journal?

- for creative expression
- for healthy introspection
- for posterity
- for fun

Keeping a journal can be one of the most satisfying things you ever do for yourself. A journal is different from a diary in that you need not keep it every day (though most people find that, like exercise, the more consistent they are with it, the more they benefit). With a journal, the emphasis is less on *what* happens each day and more on your *reaction* to what happens. It is a place for you to dream, philosophize, imagine, vent and figure things out. A journal is personal and private and a place where you can get to know yourself better. It is a way for you to chronicle your life's journey — hence, the term "journal."

Sometimes the most difficult step in either a journey or in writing is getting started. The suggested topics in class each day are intended, not to restrict your writing, but to help you begin, if you need a boost. Feel free to ignore the suggestions whenever you have something else you would rather write about. Whether you want to pursue a suggested topic or go off on a tangent, let your own mind be your true guide.

The primary rule for keeping a journal is that you write honestly. Record your observations, work out your worries, indulge your ideas, follow your fancy, and write, write, write!

Hints for the beginning "journalist":

- Date each entry. Someday you will want to know when you were thinking these thoughts.
- Write in ink. It is more permanent and easier to read later.
- Keep your mind on the here and now, not on some future reader.
- Say what you really want to say. Don't worry about whether or not it will sound right to someone else.
- Focus on your ideas, your thoughts, your feelings, your observations -- not just on external events.

Happy journaling!!

Tried and true topics to help students when they have trouble getting started

Who are you -- really?

What was the greatest lesson you have ever learned?

Describe yourself as a stranger might see you.

Describe yourself as your best friend knows you.

What are the qualities a best friend must possess?

What makes you special?

Describe the qualities you most admire in someone you might call a "hero."

Describe your room from your mom's perspective.

Describe your favorite relative.

Describe the perfect girl/boy.

Describe your favorite place to be alone.

Describe your "perfect day."

Write about an unusual dream.

How do people know when you are upset?

It is your best friend's birthday. Your gift is a memory for every year. Briefly summarize those memories for your friend.

What was the most memorable part of your first day of school?

Describe your favorite teacher.

What qualities do you really hate in a teacher? (No names, please!)

List your pet peeves.

Describe the ideal job for a teenager.

Compare your life with the growing-up years of one of your parents.

Who has it easier — girls or guys? Defend your position.

✕ When have you been wrongly accused?

Why should people recycle?

✕ Describe a time when you were afraid.

Describe a time when you were lonely.

Describe a time when you were embarrassed.

Write a letter to a future teenager — one who will be your age now in 100 years.

Write a letter to a famous person. Ask for advice, opinions, explanations. Tell the person why you admire him or her.

Write a letter to a long-lost relative or friend, describing your life today.

Write about a time a parent (or another adult) embarrassed you.

✕ What must a person do to be trusted?

Tell about a lie you wish you had not told (or one you are glad you told).

What do you think about people who spread gossip? (No names, please.)

What makes people popular?

When you look in the mirror what do you see? Go into detail.

What question really bothers you?

What famous person would you most like to meet? Why?

If you could live anywhere in the world, where would it be and why?

Compare yourself to your favorite animal.

Describe the first time you:

- tried to ski
- rode a bike
- roller skated
- skate-boarded
- ice skated
- tried to swim
- were left alone
- had a job
- drove a car
- ate in a fancy restaurant
- got in trouble with a teacher
- had a fight with a friend
- went on a date

If you know your astrological sign, do you think you have those characteristics? Be specific.

How important is religion in your life?

If you had to flee from your burning house, what would you want to save? Explain your choices.

Describe an "odd character" in your life.

What compliment have you received lately? How did it make you feel?

What causes loneliness?

Under what circumstances would it be okay to lie?

What do you think causes prejudice?

If you could design the perfect school, what would it be like?

What makes tv worth watching? Not worth watching?

Describe the "coolest" elderly person you know.

Could you be President of the United States? Why or why not?

I am not the way I seem when it comes to _____

What do you like to do when you are alone?

What kind of parent will you be?

What rules do you think teenagers should have at home?

If you were teacher for a day, what changes would you make? What would you keep?

If today were the last day of your life, how would you want to spend it?

If you could change the world, what would you start with?

Describe your worst enemy (it may not be a person!).

Write a letter you would never send.

Who or what makes you laugh?

Write about your strengths — don't be modest.

Tell about the "neatest" adult you have ever known.

In my family, I am the . . . (leader, clown, trouble-maker, peace-maker, slave, etc.).

Is it better to be the oldest child, the youngest child, the middle child, or an only child? Why?

Do you ever pretend to be something you are not? Why?

Describe your earliest memory. What does that memory say about you or about your life?

Why do people wear masks?

Where could a lizard hide?

Describe the world from a frightened lizard's perspective.

If I could be anywhere else, I would rather be

Are you worried about becoming an adult? Why or why not?

The thing that drives me crazy

- about teachers is
- about boys/girls is
- about tv commercials is
- about joggers is
- about _____ is

Someone once said, "Whatever does not destroy me makes me strong." What in your life is making you strong?

What does freedom mean to you?

Should everyone have responsibilities? Why?

Do you believe in miracles? Explain your answer.

Do you believe that there is any significance to dreams? Go into detail.

What fads do you think will become a standard part of our culture?

What is the greatest invention of all time?

Describe an idea for a great invention of your own.

What do you want to do that you are not allowed to do? *Should* you be allowed to do it?

Why should little kids be allowed to get dirty?

What is the most effective form of punishment that parents can use in disciplining their children?

Would you rather be an astronaut or a rattlesnake keeper? A surgeon or a concert pianist? A teacher or a garbage collector?

What is the best movie you have ever seen? Explain why.

- What tv show ought to be taken off the air?
- Describe your (or someone else's) pet's personality.
- Some people swear they have seen unidentified flying objects. Are they crazy?
- What effect does the weather have on your mood?
- Explain why you listen to "your kind of music."
- Pretend that you are ruler of the world. What would you do with all that power?
- What do you think is the most serious issue facing people today?
- What was the most meaningful conversation you have had lately?
- Do events happen by accident or is there a plan devised by a supreme being?
- What advice would you give someone just beginning _____?
- Should old people be forced to go to nursing homes?
- Do you believe in marriage?
- Why do so many marriages end in divorce?
- Do you believe in the supernatural? ESP, perhaps? Why or why not?
- What would you do if you saw a ghost?
- Defend your opinion on whether or not we should use capital punishment to punish criminals.
- What is your greatest hope (or fear) for the future?
- How do clothes influence our behavior?
- List ten ways you could improve.
- Is it better to be poor but happy or rich but miserable?
- List seventeen ways you could improve the environment.
- Why do you think people gossip?
- Do people have a responsibility to take care of each other?
- What famous person has touched your life in some way? Did you see or meet the person? Is the person a relative? Did the person affect your life some other way?
- What characteristic about the opposite sex annoys you the most?
- Describe the "perfect parent."
- Is there life after death?

Do you believe that intelligent life exists on other planets? What makes you think so?

When I get my feelings hurt, I respond by

These are my personal "ten commandments"

I wish I could do something about _____.

If I could go to any part of the world, I would visit _____ first. (Tell why.)

People should be really careful about what they say, because

The perfect job for me would be _____.
(Why?)

What would you do if a good friend repeated a secret you had told him or her?

Why is it good to treat everyone with courtesy?

The biggest time-waster in my life is _____.
(Explain.)

Describe when you feel most in tune with nature.

Are you worried about becoming an adult? Why or why not?

Do you have plenty of time to do what you want to do? Explain.

If you could live in another time in our history, when would it be and why?

Describe your favorite holiday from the time you first start getting ready for it until it's over.

Paint a picture with words of the face of:

- someone you love
- the oldest person you know
- your best friend
- the most unusual person you've seen
- yourself

Describe the best gift you have ever received.

Describe the best gift you have ever given.

Should children be forced to receive a religious education?

What kind of life do you imagine for yourself?

What will you have to do to make it come true?

What is your favorite daydream?

Recount your weirdest dream.

One thing I've always wanted to tell _____ is that _____.

Why do some people find fault with every little thing?

What do people have to do to have friends?

Describe your favorite outfit (clothes). Why do you like it so much?

How have you changed in the last year?

What is something you do to help

- your friends?
- your family?
- yourself?
- the world?

Describe your favorite time of day.

Tell about a time when you did something that took a lot of courage — for you (swimming, giving a speech, asking for a date, having surgery, standing up for yourself, etc.).

If you had a friend who was in serious trouble, what would you do?

Define "peer pressure." Who feels the effects of it?

Which do you think is more harmful to young television viewers, violence or nudity? Why?

What is something important you have learned, something that didn't come out of a book?

What can we do to eliminate homelessness?

Why do you think people abuse drugs?

Who should be responsible for providing sex education — parents, teachers or religious leaders? Why?

Describe your most memorable holiday — food, smells, gifts, decorations, relatives, traditions, unusual events.

Describe your favorite places to play when you were a child.

Have you created a "masterpiece" yet in your life? It could be concrete or abstract. Describe it.

Describe one act for which you would like to be remembered.

Describe a characteristic, talent or tendency you have inherited.

What about your life is heroic or admirable?

What advice would you give to a man or a woman about to become a stepparent?

Are you anybody's hero?

Do all animals have the right to live? How about insects? Why or why not?

What makes people want to join gangs?

Describe a group which you would feel comfortable joining.

Which would you rather be, beautiful or brainy?
Why?

How can you turn a failure into something positive?

What is there that you value that you could offer as a gift to someone you love?

Describe a "magic machine" that you invent.

If you had to lose one of your senses, which one would be the last one you would pick? Why?

Imagine that you are deaf, blind or paralyzed. What would your world be like?

If you were to suddenly lose your sight, what three things would you miss seeing the most?

How would you describe music to a deaf person?

What is the most delightful thing you've ever seen? Describe it.

Can someone who is not intelligent teach other people something? Explain.

Is there a relationship between being intelligent and being a good person? Explain.

If you could have an operation that would make you twice as intelligent as you are, would you have it? Why or why not?

In what area of my life am I walking when I should be running? What can I do to get myself to run?

Why do good people have to suffer sometimes?

Is there any such thing as innocence?

Imagine that you suddenly had to go into hiding. Describe why you had to hide, who would hide with you, what few belongings you would take, and where you would hide.

Describe a classmate or teacher who will stand out in your memory twenty years from now.

What's the worst advice you've ever received? The best?

Should friends offer advice to each other in matters of the heart? Explain your ideas.

Should friends date each other? Defend your position.

In your family, who gives the best advice? Why do you think so?

Who, among your friends or family, understands you the best? What makes you think so?

What proof do you have of your existence?

If you could make the rules for this class (or this school, or the world), what would they be? Explain why you think they would be necessary.

Briefly describe the best book you've ever read and tell why it appealed to you so much.

If these walls (pick any walls) could talk, what stories would they tell?

Do plants have feelings? Emotions? Personalities?
How about animals?

In what situations is it good for a person to cry?

Does equality of the sexes really exist?

Are all people really created equal?

What's wrong with —

- smoking
- using drugs
- pre-marital sex
- swearing
- stealing
- using your friend's homework
- R or X-rated movies
- pornography
- dumping trash wherever you want
- pretending that you like someone or something
- flattery
- telling white lies
- hunting
- gambling
- wearing make-up
- parties
- being lazy
- being competitive

Can money buy happiness? Explain your answer.

Considering what you know now, what would you have done differently in your life?

What does the saying "Opportunity only knocks once" mean?

What does it mean to be truly an individual?

Should students be forced to make career choices at any early age? Why or why not?

How can parents influence their children's choices? Think about friends, religion, college, hobbies, careers, spouses, etc.

Why is honesty the best policy?

How important is one's reputation?

Do you think you'll marry someday or remain single? Why?

What are you thankful for today?

How could you show someone you appreciate her or him?

When should people control their emotions or let them show?

What do the terms "pro-choice" and "pro-life" mean to you?

Should America become involved in other countries' wars? Explain your answer.

Is there any such thing as an honest politician?

If you could go to another planet, would you? Explain your answer.

Should all people participate in some kind of sport?

Is there life after death?

Describe the perfect --

- house
- sport
- hideaway
- friend
- boss
- principal
- parent
- teacher
- pet
- date

Do you view the future with fear or optimism?