



## How to Keep a Learning Journal

~ Jill K. Wachholz

Many professionals initially wince at the suggestion of keeping a “learning journal” for their development. They wonder, “Why should I bother?” and “Where would I begin anyway?”

Those who take the leap discover that journaling can be a powerful vehicle for growth. Self-awareness and adaptability are vital competencies today. We need to take charge of our own development. Be vigilant about our influence on others. Learn quickly and deeply. The focus and freedom a journal provides can support these efforts.

In this paper I’ll spell out common purposes for journaling, then share various frameworks and tips to get you started.

### Why Journal?

Key reasons to reflect in a journal are to:

- Learn from experiences – successes, mistakes, and challenges.
- Track progress and hold oneself accountable for achieving goals and taking action.
- Develop critical thinking skills to guide future decisions.
- Apply theoretical concepts to actual work/life experiences.
- Broaden one’s perspective -- view situations from various angles.
- Capture intuition that may otherwise remain hidden. <sup>1</sup>
- Express feelings and make sense of complex emotions.
- Recognize patterns over time and the impact they have.
- Strengthen a sense of responsibility for how we perceive and respond to situations.
- Anticipate, consider options, and plan future actions.
- Reframe past experiences in light of present knowledge or wisdom.

- Align daily actions with values, principles and priorities.
- Sustain performance by keeping a record of activities and accomplishments.
- Achieve a greater sense of satisfaction, meaning, or confidence.
- Pose provocative and challenging questions.
- Examine one's assumptions and beliefs.

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<sup>1</sup> Perry Zeus and Suzanne Skiffington, *The Coaching at Work Toolkit* (McGraw-Hill Australia, 2002) p. 279

- Reflect on personal insights from lectures, discussions, books, and media.
- Collect ideas to use in future presentations, articles, or projects.

### **Where to Begin**

Begin with curiosity and a desire to learn. The maxim “measure what matters” applies to self-reflection because what we pay attention to tends to grow. So I invite you to be intentional and write about what really matters to you and your development.

Below are some “reflection-starters” to get you going. There is no right or wrong way to journal, so feel free to tailor these frameworks--to experiment, mix and match, explore.

## **Reflection – Starters**

### **For Learning from Experience <sup>2</sup>**

1. Identify the trigger event or experience. Be objective.
2. Describe your thoughts, feelings, and behaviors--why you responded as you did.
3. Note relevant consequences.
4. Reflect on what you learned.
5. Consider how you'll apply what you learned in the future.

### **For Tracking Progress on a Goal**

1. What did you do that worked well, and why?
2. What didn't work well, and why?
3. What are some signs that you're making progress?
4. What is it like for you to try something new or to venture out of your comfort zone?

5. What are you resisting or avoiding? What obstacles exist? How will you address these things?
6. What other options would you like to try?

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<sup>2</sup> Adapted from Learning Journals from the Center for Creative Leadership

### **For Developing a Skill or Attribute**

1. Get clear on the target. Read descriptions of the specific competency or trait you want to master. What would success ideally look like in your life?
2. Strengthen your motivation. Why do you really want this change? What will be the short and long-term benefits (to you, others, your organization)? What will be the potential costs? Will your efforts be worth it?
3. Lists actions taken. Daily or weekly, log examples of when you demonstrated the skill or attribute.
4. Note lessons and insights gained.
5. Learn from role models. Observe those who exhibit this competency either extremely well or very poorly. What specifically do they do or not do? How may you adopt or avoid similar behaviors?

### **For Learning from a Current Hardship**

1. What is happening? What is not happening?
2. How are you feeling, thinking, and acting?
3. What is particularly stressful or painful about this? What is at stake or seems threatening?
4. How are you coping?
5. How would you like to respond? How can you best leverage your strengths?
6. In what ways is this situation the same or different from other ones? What patterns do you recognize?
7. How would you like to be supported? What resources can you enlist?
8. What opportunities exist here? What could you learn from this hardship?

### **For Reflecting on a Difficult Interaction**

1. What happened?

2. What were your assumptions and expectations?
3. What did you hope would happen?
4. What were the other party's expectations, thoughts, feelings and needs?
5. What did you learn?
6. What are your best options moving forward to positively influence the situation?

### **Tips for Effective Journaling**

- Remember, there is no “one size fits all” way to journal. Try different techniques. Discover ways that work best for you.
- It's practical to have a portable journal, whether paper or electronic. Keep it handy so you can literally “reflect on the run.”
- When describing what happened, try to be as objective as a video camera. This will help you become a keen observer of yourself, others, and the situation at hand.
- Take time to review or “mine” your journal every few months to identify patterns and extract nuggets you want to reinforce.
- Stay alert for unforeseen insights and outcomes. Not all learning is intentional, planned or targeted. Remain receptive, and many unexpected discoveries will emerge.
- Get creative. Try using colors, images, symbols, quotes, storytelling, mind-mapping, or script-writing.
- Research and borrow self-reflection techniques from other fields, such as creative writing, spiritual growth, healing and wellness, education, the arts, travel, psychology, career development.

### Resources:

Seibert, K.W., & Daudelin, M.W. (1999). *The Role of Reflection in Managerial Learning*. Quorum Books.

Hughes, R., Ginnett, R., Curphy, G. (1993-2008). *Leadership: Enhancing the Lessons from Experience*. McGraw-Hill/Irwin.

Moon, J. (2006). *Learning Journals: A Handbook for Academics, Students and Professional Development*. Routledge Publishers.

Capacchione, Lucia. (2001). *The Creative Journal*. New Page Books.

Benchmarks Developmental Learning Guide & Learning Journals from programs of the Center for Creative Leadership, Greensboro NC.

Zeus, P., & Skiffington, S.(2002). *The Coaching at Work Toolkit: A Complete Guide to Techniques & Practices*, McGraw-Hill Australia.