

How to use this book

One of the essential ingredients of creative journal writing is freedom: freedom from judgements, freedom to write as you wish and only about what interests you. How you will use this book is, necessarily, entirely up to you. But my humble suggestion is that you first read it through like a conventional book, stopping only if an exercise here or there grabs you by the ankle and pulls you to the ground. *Stop here.* If that doesn't happen, experience the ideas and the many wonderful stories as a whole, and only then go back to work your way through it far more personally, engaging with all the exercises that you want, at the pace you want, and in the way you want.

Pleasure is the other essential ingredient of journal writing. So use this book in the way that will give you most pleasure: reading, writing, pausing, setting aside, returning: all at a pace and in a rhythm entirely of your own making.

Whose plans?

*It takes courage to do what
you want. Other people have
a lot of plans for you.*

Joseph Campbell

Getting started





Writing a journal may change your life

I want to write, but more than that, I want to bring out
all kinds of things that lie buried deep in my heart.

Anne Frank

On thick white pages in a leather-bound book or scribbled across the backs of envelopes tossed into a cardboard box; written faithfully through a lifetime or with years in between entries; written lyrically or as a bare list: journal writing may well be the most accommodating of all writing forms. It may also be the most pleasurable.

The impulse to write is natural for many people. Yet the demands of more public forms of writing can be inhibiting or even crushing. In the private spaces of your journal, a genuine sense of possibility is renewed with every blank page. The internal judge or critic that so often sits between the writer and the page can be sacked. The possibilities of style, mood and expression that journal writing offers are limitless.

Journal writing is a supreme way to record your own life's journey. It is a way to discover what matters to you and even what and how you think. It is a gloriously self-directed source of inner development, yet it also makes the world beyond your own self more real and more vivid. It can become an interface between you and the outside world. It can become a companion that supports

but doesn't judge. It can be a place of discovery, of learning, of emotional relief and insight. It can also become a playground, where the everyday rules of writing, reflecting, problem-solving, goal-setting, production and planning no longer apply.

Without restrictions or censorship your mind can race – or slow down. It can step outside boxes or turn them sideways. It can make utterly fresh connections or simply pause, allowing you to see what is familiar with new eyes. It can train you to observe with subtlety all kinds of situations. And it can help you to learn something of value even from the unwelcome ones.

Journal writing will train and hone your eye for beauty. It will invite you into the present moment (while also allowing you to roam your past). It will let you re-experience awe and wonder. It will let you intensify and renew your pleasure in events and situations that have gone well. It will support your recovery (and the gaining of wisdom) from the times you wish had never happened.

However small the physical pages on which you are writing, your journal is big enough to encompass all of your selves: your intuitive self, your everyday competent self, your dreamy self, your practical self; your uncertain self and the self who knows just what is needed. This is a place, too, where you can talk to your soul or spirit, and hear your soul talk back to you. You can talk to other people, alive or dead; you can release uncomfortable emotions and find new responses.

It is virtually impossible to write a journal and not discover more about yourself. It is absolutely impossible to write a journal and not put your own stamp on it. Every journal is inevitably original. When it comes to journal writing, there is no formula. There are certainly props and prompts. And I share many here. In journal writing, though, these are intended to be liberating, not constricting.

The freshness that comes from writing in this way very naturally permeates your life. A journal consists of observations, insights, memories, impressions and feelings. It may also include plans and analysis. It may have layers of secrets and trails of jokes. It is the container for dreams and hopes. Sometimes it is literally marked by tears. It is where failures and successes weave to form a texture that can eventually be seen as the reflection of a complex and rich life. Failures or setbacks may matter a little less as the journal helps you increasingly to see your life as a whole. Successes and satisfactions may be valued a little more.

Journal writing is the key to discovering your own unique inner world. Your journal belongs to you. And your journal reflects you. For many journal writers, the journal is also a guide, a map, a treasure trove and a repository of memories.

As I write these lines, I am thinking about the chart that was once on the back of my kitchen door, measuring my children's height as they grew. A journal tracks your growth too, but with greater subtlety. Sometimes it is hard to see how far you have come until you are startled by something you wrote five years ago, or maybe only five months ago.

Journal writer Dieter has this to say about writing his journal: 'Writing a journal makes you examine your life. As long as you record mainly the positive, you will have hours of reading in old age. You probably wish you could re-live your life. You will be.'

This view nicely echoes a statement from writer and poet D.H. Lawrence: 'If only one could have two lives: the first in which to make one's mistakes ... and the second in which to profit by them.'

And American writer Gail Godwin says, 'I write for my future self, as well as my present mood. And sometimes, to set the record straight, I jot down a word or two in old diaries to my former self – to encourage, to scold, to correct, to set things in perspective.'

Retire the judge

Journal writing is all about process – not goals or outcome.

It is freeing – not constraining.

Journal writing is also where you can *retire* the inner critic or judge.

How you write, what you write, matters only to you.

You are writing to please no one but yourself.

Celebrate!

Marco Polo, May Sarton, Thomas Merton, Anais Nin, Andy Warhol, Richard E. Grant, Anne Frank, Samuel Pepys, Winston Churchill, Cleopatra, Louis XVI, Rainer Maria Rilke, Virginia Woolf and Katherine Mansfield are just some of the countless people who have valued the art and practice of journal writing.

Each of them, through years of writing about the large and small matters that make up a life, created something absolutely distinct. What they wanted from journal writing, and what they brought to it, reflected their unique interaction of needs, passions, reflections and aspirations.

In her novel, *Fear of Flying*, Erica Jong's heroine, Isadora Wing, reflects on what journal writing has given her. 'As I read the notebook, I began to be drawn into it as into a novel. I almost began to forget that I had written it. And then a curious revelation started to dawn. I stopped blaming myself; it was that simple ... [It was] heartening to see how much I had changed in the past four years.'

For me, journal writing is the writing and thinking place where I am least inhibited. It's where my great love for words (inherited from both my schoolteacher parents) can pour out without any sense of judgement about what other people will think of

what I am doing or saying. Often, though, it is not the words that I am paying most attention to, but the thoughts that I am seeking to express. Here, too, there are far fewer moments of self-consciousness or censorship than in most of the other writing that I do. These days I am writing my books, as I have done for more than 20 years now; I am writing my regular ‘Inner Life’ column in *Good Weekend*; I am writing my Interfaith services and material for the talks and retreats that I regularly give; I am writing countless emails. And, intermittently but passionately, I continue to write a journal as I have done – sometimes with long gaps – for most of my life.

Throughout this book I describe and demonstrate what is specific for me about journal writing, but the qualities that come first to mind are that it is intimate and free. In fact, it is not only ‘free’ – especially free of censorship – it is also freeing.

There is much that I can say or do in the pages of a journal that would be impossible in other writing contexts. I can create a ‘still-life’ in words, for example, entirely for my own pleasure: a snapshot that has greater depth and dimension than a photograph ever could. The frustrated painter in me gets tremendous pleasure from that. I can dwell on my family, on my totally personal concerns, without any fears that I am boring anyone or being too self-focused. I can write lovingly and probably sentimentally about our cats. I can copy out prayers or thoughts that support my spiritual development.

Many journal writers who are also professional writers, as I am, use their journals as the place to develop ideas or reflect on their intellectual work in progress. I can see the value of this, and have always loved reading journals that include this – lately, for example, and very intensely, the journals of Thomas Merton and Rainer Maria Rilke; earlier, the journals of Virginia Woolf

and Anais Nin. (May Sarton is also widely read but she too is very focused on domestic details and the natural world, while also writing about her life as a poet and novelist.)

What I have also learned, however, is that admiring a particular style of journal writing, or the way journal writing can be used, is not enough. Journal writing is naturally instinctive; perhaps it is the most instinctive form of writing that we have. That's why it can be such a powerful support for our creativity generally, if we allow that. And that's why there is no right or 'perfect' way to do it. Very directly, it reflects what is unique and irreplaceable about each person's internal world.

My own journal writing suffers from my professional writing in that it almost always comes last. The only exception was when I was going through an especially rough patch some years ago (that lasted for several years) and my need was overwhelming for the depth of inner dialogue that *only* journal writing makes possible.

More generally, when I am under a great deal of (self-inflicted) pressure to produce writing in my other fields, it is my journal writing that gets set aside. (Lavish promises to ourselves are not enough.) Yet when I am not writing anything at all in my journal, I know very well what I am missing.

Journal writing is the place where I can be most playful and frivolous, where my life as a mother gets its due prominence, where my immediate physical environment looms largest, and where my professional writing life – which truly dominates and drives my waking hours – fades into relative insignificance. Here is a short example, written the night before I was due to teach one hundred people journal writing. It reflects the work I am doing the next day and to some extent was prompted by it. What dominates though, at least from my perspective, is my interior life and my domestic life.