



# Journaling for Self-Knowledge

**-a brief guide-**

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## **Foreword**

Self-reflection through journaling is the heart of my personal self-knowledge process. In this brief guide I want to share with you some what I have learned about journaling from my many years of daily journaling. By doing so, I want to help empower you to have a richer process of self-reflection so that you can heal your emotional wounds and live your grandest dreams.

Take care,

**Steven Franssen**

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## What is journaling?

TheFreeDictionary.com defines 'journal' as-

*A personal record of occurrences, experiences, and reflections kept on a regular basis; a diary*

Given this definition, 'journaling' would be the process of writing this personal record.

A journal, or diary, is a safe place where one can examine their life experiences, emotions, internal dialogue, and relationships without being beholden to an outside authority. Journaling is a spontaneous and genuine process that unfolds from the deepest places of a person's consciousness.

Journaling is a tool that requires time, effort, and awareness to hone and develop. When I look back at my first focused and dedicated journal entries, they consisted mostly of "I went to so-and-so's house and then I went grocery shopping and then I went to a show and then I went to bed". Rinse and repeat. With years of dedicated practice I have been able to arrive at a more vulnerable and exploratory place in less time and with less effort than the days of "Event A then Event B". I tend to have an easier time of studying my motivations, probing for blind spots, and healing the wounded sides of me.

## Why should one journal?

Your purpose for journaling is your own. Some choose to journal in order to become more self-actualized, to manifest who they really are: a person who is fully honest and aligned with truth. Most choose to journal in order to attain some sort of goal or value in their own life. Maybe they want more satisfaction in their personal relationships or in their professional lives. Maybe they want to lose weight and keep track of their body's changes. Journaling can be used for any personal development process under the sun.

For those who choose to journal in order to become fully honest, emotionally mature, and to manifest their personal magnificence, there is a basic process of healing. This process involves going through four stages of healing. Different parts of us can be at different stages in the process.

The **FIRST STAGE** is dissociation –i.e. winning the false contest of life. It is in this stage that we have denied our deepest traumas in favor of winning the approval of our main abusers: our parents. If we disappear completely into dissociation, we become pseudo-enlightened. This is a state of blissful pleasure and delusion. All of the world’s cults dangle out the promise of this state the same way a carnivorous plant secretes a sweet nectar in order to ensnare its prey. “Live in the NOW.” “Forgive your parents.” “Forget the past.”

The **SECOND STAGE** is suffering. It is in this stage that we have stripped away our idealizations of our parents but not yet unearthed the truth of our pasts. This stage is marked by depression, anguish, listlessness, and misery. We often seek desperately to turn those around us into the ideal parents we never had.

The **THIRD STAGE** is grieving. It is a time of “purposeful suffering”. It is in this stage that we wade into the valley of boils left to us by the abuse of our caretakers, lance in hand. We burst the boils, withstand the long dormant and painful emotions buried within, and mourn for what was and what could have been instead. We confront the truth of our traumas, whether in person with our primary caretakers in childhood or internally on an intrapersonal level. We surge forth to the last stage.

The **FOURTH STAGE** is self-actualization. According to Carl Jung, the founder of analytical psychology, this is where the “marriage within” is achieved. It is in this stage that we manifest our deepest truths, live in inner harmony, and fully heal our emotional wounds.

Just to reiterate, different sides of us can be at different stages on the path. A person’s true maturity depends on the degree to which the different parts of their personality have undergone this process. Most people remain almost fully in the first stage and reap the benefits of culture, government,

religion, and familial approval at the cost of discovering and re-experiencing the painful, but also oftentimes wonderful, truth that resides within them. A rare few choose to pursue true maturity at the expense of the false support beams of normal society. An even rarer few pursue healing beyond the ancient bonds of familial approval. The work is worth it, however, as these few who venture forth will unlock a treasure trove of clarity, happiness, and creativity.

Whether your journaling takes on such a monumental task as full self-actualization or it is simply for de-stressing after work, the same basic process of unearthing, re-experiencing, and integrating can be followed. The process itself tends to be more satisfying than focusing on the goals.

## What are the modes of journaling?

Different modes of journaling have different drawbacks and benefits depending on the mode you choose. In case you prefer hearing and watching someone speak about the modes over reading about them, I talk about the different modes in the video I filmed for my YouTube channel, [An Introduction to Journaling](#). I'll go over the modes here as well.

**Writing implement & paper** has been the go-to for truth-seekers for hundreds of years. One simply sits and writes down the thoughts that come up.

*Benefits:*

- You can take this form of journaling with you anywhere.
- Writing by hand generally occurs at a slower pace than other forms and allows time for you to really consider what you're writing.
- It's inexpensive.
- There's a personal touch that can come from drawing or doodling on your written journals, writing the journals in leather bound notebooks, or writing in varying fonts and sizes.

*Potential Drawbacks:*

- If you are a slow writer, it is more difficult to write in a stream-of-consciousness manner.

- Depending on your system filing ability, tracking down important moments in old entries can be very difficult.*
- The papers pile up after a while and you can end up with a glut of paper stacks that are cumbersome to pack around.*
- Of the different modes of journaling, paper journals are the easiest for prying eyes to spy on.*

When I first began writing my thoughts on college-ruled notebook paper, I read many of Michel de Montaigne's *Essays* in an effort to understand how to meld my life's story with my philosophical and personal musings. Montaigne is known as the first published author to spontaneously write out the doubts and ideas that would occur to him. His writing style had a massive impact on Descartes, Rousseau, Nietzsche, and many other philosophers that were to follow. I found his essay "Of Imagination" very helpful in modeling for me what it looks like to just ramble about something. Growing up, it was safe only on rare occasions to express myself for long periods of time without interruption. When I first began to journal, I had a lot of pent up things I wanted to say without someone holding up their hand or walking out of the room in disinterest. Perhaps you have a similar history?

**Typing on a computer** is the journaling mode of choice for most truth-seekers I have met. One sits at their computer, puts their hands to the keys, and lets it fly.

*Benefits:*

- Allows for a more stream-of-consciousness flow over traditional paper-and-pencil journaling given elevated typing speeds.*
- Filing is made easy due to the visual layout of every modern day operating system.*
- One can easily search their journal entries by keyword or phrase.*
- Journal files and folders can be password protected (less cumbersome than a padlock!)*
- Digital journaling saves on physical space as data storage devices are tiny compared to paper notebooks.*

*Potential Drawbacks:*

*-Compared to paper journaling, for the layperson it is currently more difficult to spontaneously switch over to doodling, sketching, or overemphasizing and underemphasizing certain words for that “personal touch.”*

*-[Computer Vision Syndrome](#) is a term that encompasses a whole range of eyestrain and pain experienced by computer users. While getting two hours into a particularly intense entry is a gratifying experience, it may not be so helpful for that headache that is creeping up.*

*-Data loss does happen on occasion and can be disastrous to all those hard earned hours you’ve spent typing out your innermost thoughts. Cloud storage ([Link 1](#), [Link 2](#)) is a useful solution to this problem.*

The argument has been made by some that one puts more thought and intention into words written by hand, as the pace at which the thoughts come exceeds the pace at which one can write, and that therefore the paper and pencil is superior to the word dump of typed journaling. I tend to prefer typing on a computer because I like being able to record every thought that comes up in real time. My journals are not being judged by anyone for the weight of every word and passage. There is certainly something about the *feel* of writing by hand, the smell of the fresh paper, and the gliding of the pencil on the paper that can be inspiring and lead to enhanced journaling.

There is an ever-expanding variety of word processing programs to choose from for the journal keeper. Whether you are several years into your journaling or someone who’s just starting out, there’s value to be had in experimenting to see what program leads to the best experience for you. Here are some suggestions:

*[Notepad](#)- (PC only) This program has been the basic text editor for Windows for twenty years. It is simple to use and is very bare bones compared to other word processors. This is the program I use.*

*[FocusWriter](#)-(PC, Mac, Linux) “It offers an environment better than Notepad because with notepad, you still see the task bar on the bottom of*

*the screen...Launching it is another set up. It's a lightweight client so it doesn't take much time to launch, and it also opens up any files that you had left open to the place where you left them at. I find this feature very convenient when I'm typing up an extended work.” –Drew, USA*

***OneNote-** (PC, Mac) “the best information gatherer and organizer I've come across and it's the one I'm using now. You can download it for free, but you can only save your files in Microsoft's cloud, OneDrive, which has pretty decent storage capacity for a free cloud (7GB).” –Pablo, Uruguay*

***OmmWriter-** (PC, Mac) “OmmWriter is your own private writing room where you can close the door behind you to focus on your writing in peace.” –from the OmmWriter website.*

*I have used OmmWriter and find it to be very similar to Focuswriter.*

**Audio-journaling** involves speaking into a microphone connected to an audio recording device.

*Benefits:*

- One can listen back to their recorded voice and experience the changes in tone, inflection, and emotion, which can be hugely insightful for self-reflection.*
- Journaling on-the-go becomes a possibility as it is very easy to clip on a lapel microphone or speak into a set of earbuds that have a microphone built into them.*
- For those who speak faster than they can type, journaling in real time stream of consciousness is that much more realized.*
- Going over old entries does not require sitting still and reading.*
- It's a great alternative for those who are visually impaired.*
- Can fill the need for those times you “just want to be listened to”.*

*Potential Drawbacks:*

- Costs more money to get set up compared to pencil and paper.*
- There is the potential for a lack of privacy in that someone could listen in on what you're saying.*
- You may not be used to the sound of your own voice and could be turned off early on from continuing to audio-journal.*

*-Audio recording can sometimes require some technical know-how.*

**Video-journaling** is a mode that I don't personally have a lot of experience with. I have mainly used video-journaling for middle of the night sessions where I've woken up from a particularly intense dream, need the stream-of-consciousness aspect of audio-journaling, but don't feel I have the time to set up my audio-recording equipment. Aside from speaking to myself while looking in a mirror, this is the most insightful and emotionally intensive journaling experience I have experienced. Perhaps the intensity is why I don't delve into too often.

**Prayer**, though not a form of journaling, bears mentioning in this chapter as it is very similar to journaling but cannot be called journaling as journaling involves record keeping. Prayer is to speak aloud or in one's own thoughts towards oneself. It is the conscious effort to self-dialogue. Prayer is also the most private way one can process their experiences because it does not involve record keeping. Another term for this is "self-reflection".

## What is the content of journaling?

Now that I have explained the "why" of journaling and the different modes of journaling, I'd like to offer some suggestions for the actual content of your journal entries:

### **I feel...**

One of the best places to begin with your journaling is with your current emotional state. Emotions are the affective aspect of consciousness, triggered by external circumstances and deeply entwined with our historical experiences.

**Stimulus** → **thought** → **emotion**

Something will happen in our external environment. Perhaps someone makes eye contact with us. They have furrowed brows, gritted teeth, and sharpness to their gaze. The thought arises, "That person is angry."

The emotion comes next. Perhaps it is fear. Is the fear appropriate for real-time context of the situation? Is there danger? Or perhaps the thought, “That person is angry” was an incorrect assessment of the other person’s emotional state and the fear that followed the thought was not in accordance with reality.

This is where understanding personal history comes into play. Maybe the look the person gave us is deeply reminiscent on some level of the same look we were given by a caretaker before a spanking or a teacher before a shaming in front of the whole class. Fear was an appropriate reaction long ago. If our initial assessment of the here-and-now person is un-empathetic, inaccurate to their actual emotional state, our historical experience is clouding us in some way from accurately perceiving reality. In order to be healthy, our concepts must align with reality. Furthermore, our emotions must align with reality.

The majority of mainstream psychology counsels people to avoid feeling “bad” feelings or “negative” emotions.

*“Feel that uncomfortable emotional experience coming up? Switch gears and think happy thoughts!”*

The problem with this is that there is a lot of knowledge we can gain from *all* of our emotions. Anger can tell us when someone is crossing our boundaries. Healthy shame can tell us when we’re about to do something out of line with our values. Sadness can tell us there’s something missing from our lives or that something important has gone out of our lives. If we don’t listen to these uncomfortable emotions in the moment as they come up, we deny ourselves deep knowledge about our own lives. We live in denial of the truth of our experiences. We lose the ability to water the garden of our consciousness with tears of grieving. We become dissociated and operate at an intellectual level, meandering through life in a daze with an occasional outburst when someone threatens to pierce our denial with their authenticity. Since we do not accept the fullness of our emotional experiences because of “positive thinking”, we are unable to process these outbursts. We become doomed to live life in endless, robotic loops. Rather than “avoid” these “bad feelings”, we can use journaling to go into our “bad”

emotions and begin to make sense of their origins and how they influence our daily personal lives.

By beginning a journal entry with “I feel”, you are putting the richness of emotional experience first. Let’s say earlier in the day you saw a boy take something from his younger sister when you were out on a walk. In reality, the boy has victimized his sister because he has been victimized by someone bigger than him. He’s passing his pain along so he doesn’t have to internalize it. To express your anger at the boy, with whom you have no personal relationship, would probably result in the boy turning around the first chance he got and victimizing his sister again. He would not know what to do with the overwhelming confusion he felt at some stranger coming up to him and giving him an earful. To acknowledge the emotion coming up in the moment for you as valid and promising it some important focused time in journaling spares both you and the boy from a situation where the adult in the situation is not acting with clarity and understanding of their own triggering. From a simple, “I feel angry and the thought is...” you could end up writing 1500 words on how an older sibling consistently broke into your room and took your stuff when you were growing up and how you could never express anger at them because the moment you did they would beat you up. This is one example. The scenarios are infinite.

As you practice processing your emotional experiences in the sanctuary of your journal, you will start to get a better and better understanding of:

- A) Your empathic ability – whether those split second, initial appraisals of another person’s emotional state are accurate or not and to what degree they are accurate or not.
- B) How much trauma underlies so many of your emotional experiences
- C) Deeper patterns that exist for you *because* of those traumas.

Practice in processing emotional experiences through your journal entries will lead you to being able to process emotional experiences outside of your journal. You will be able to identify the particular “flavor” of anger, sadness, happiness, fear, etc. that is coming up for you in the moment and more readily connect with your own history attached to that flavor. The same way

the sensuous aftertaste of a ripe mango slice or the gentle bite of a red onion added to a stew can elicit all sorts of childhood memories, so can “flavors” of emotion – if we train ourselves to be in touch and *really* listen to what our emotions have to say.

A potential pitfall here in analyzing and processing your emotional experiences would be to assign blame for your emotions to someone else. The most common form this takes is, “You make me feel *x, y, z.*” There is no one reaching inside of your head, pushing the Anger Button or the Frustration Button. Your emotions come from your years of life experience. They come from the knowledge you have accrued about the emotional reactions of others, especially your parents. They are the roadmap for getting your needs met based on long-standing and hard-earned lessons on what works and what doesn’t. To assign someone else the responsibility for having caused one of your emotions is to deny the breadth and beauty of your life’s experience for the sake of not having to accept responsibility for something that occurs purely in your own consciousness. Others can *catalyze* or *trigger* our emotional events but the flavor of our emotion is entirely our own.

## Journal Prompts

Journal prompts are a potential tool for the toolbox of someone seeking emotional truth. They are brief scenarios or suggestive prompts designed with the intention of sparking introspection and creative thought. This can be a handy way of piercing a mental malaise and connecting more deeply with your emotional processes. Alternately, if you find yourself stuck in the cognitive mode of thinking, a timely journal prompt could help you get into an affective mode of thinking- a place of connection with your emotions.

Please consider the following journal prompts as suggestions for potential pathways to self-discovery:

- Write about your favorite childhood toy and what it meant to you.*
- Describe a dream you remember having in childhood.*
- Write a letter to someone who is or was important to you. Tell them your*

*honest feelings.*

- What was your favorite pet in childhood and why?
- Who is someone you feel uncomfortable or anxious around? Why?
- If you never again had to worry about having enough money, what would you do for work?
- What are the interpersonal dynamics between the characters of your favorite movie?
- What would the childhood of the author of your favorite song had to have been like for them to pen the lyrics they did?
- What is the worst problem facing the world today? Could you relate this problem to some purely internal dynamic going on within you?
- If you could dine with any figure in world history, who would you dine with? How would conversation go?
- What terrifies you? If you could say any kind words to that which terrifies you, what would you say?
- What are your virtues?
- What are your values?
- What are your principles?
- Who has had the biggest impact on you as a person in the past year? Why?
- What is your body trying to tell you today?
- Did you have any imaginary friends growing up? What purpose did they serve?
- Analysis of your personal relationships
- Analysis of your strongest emotional experience in the week/month/year/decade prior
- Analysis of what REALLY bothers you and why
- Analysis of the times in your childhood your parents were nurturing toward you
- Analysis of times they hurt you
- Budgeting and planning of your finances
- What would you say to yourself if you could go back in time and revisit yourself during some big turning point in your life?
- How were your parents wounded by their parents?
- What are your standards for friendship, romance, and your relationship

*with yourself?*

For more journaling prompts, I would heartily recommend visiting the late and great Nathaniel Branden's [Twitter page](#).

## A Week-long Journaling Course

This course is intended to help you survey a basic understanding of your relationship to yourself. Beginning and seasoned journal-keepers alike should be able to gain something new from this endeavor. Please set aside 20 distraction-free minutes each day to answer the following series of structured journaling prompts. Additionally, please keep the seven entries from the series in a convenient place so that you can easily access the entries and reflect on them when the course comes to a close. It is best to do your journaling in the morning before the concerns of the day set in or at the end of the day as part of a bedtime routine:

MONDAY-

*Recall one pleasant and one unpleasant childhood memory. With each one, journal about what happened, who was there, how I felt about things in the moment, and how I think this memory influenced me growing up.*

*This exercise will help me to be more connected to who I was in my childhood.*

TUESDAY-

*Revisit the unpleasant memory I wrote about yesterday. Journal about what I could say to myself to offer some encouragement or nurturing if I could go back in time and revisit this event. What kind of guidance could I have used that would have helped me to feel more secure and loved? How would a good parent show love and support for me during this unpleasant experience?*

*Doing this exercise will help me to re-parent myself and heal from my childhood trauma.*

**WEDNESDAY-**

*Journal about my experience of going through puberty. When did it begin for me? What were the emotions around this experience like for me? Was I able to confide in anyone about the changes going on? What kind of messages did I get at the time about my changing body? If there were any feelings of shame, embarrassment, or humiliation around this time, where did they come from? How did I feel once I passed out of puberty and into adulthood (in regards to the puberty process) and how old was I? What were the different stages of puberty for me like?*

*Doing this exercise will help me to connect to who I was as a teenager and reexamine some of the potentially confusing messages I received at the time about human sexuality.*

**THURSDAY-**

*If I were to be a professional artist, what kind of art would I make and why? How do I know this is the kind of art for me? What experiences have I had in this field of art in the past? Has anyone helped shape me as an artist in this respect? What do I think the world could use more of in respect to this art form? What would a very good work of art from me in this discipline look like? If I allow myself to do this art even poorly, what would be the first step I would take toward making this art?*

*This set of prompts will help me to nurture my creativity and begin to shape what it is that I could do to bring some of my ideas into the world.*

**FRIDAY-**

*Examine my professional/vocational life. Name the three most formative positions I've held and examine how they have helped me develop as a person either from learning what to do or what not to do. How can I take these lessons and apply them to my own self-knowledge process?*

*This exercise will help me to begin to blend my self-knowledge process and my professional career, bringing me more satisfaction and productivity in both spheres!*

## SATURDAY-

*Investigate my interactions in my personal relationships. What behaviors of mine are healthy? What behaviors are unhealthy? Explore the roots of two of the healthy behaviors and two of the unhealthy behaviors. Lastly, describe the ways in which I still maintain an unhealthy attachment to my family, either externally or internally.*

*This process will help me to have a deeper understanding of the ways in which my trauma shows up in my relationships. This will yield more self-control and self-assurance in the moments in which I am tempted to act out my childhood wounds. This will lead to more honest relationships and healthier boundaries between me and others. This will also help me to mature and become more independent of my family.*

## SUNDAY-

*Reflect on this journaling course. When did the journaling flow for me? Were there any difficult or unclear spots for me? How could I follow up on those difficult spots? What other reflections do I have on the journaling course?*

*Bonus: If I feel like it would help me, I can design my own seven day journaling course with prompts for each day. I can tailor this course specifically to my own needs or I could write it for a more general audience. I can use the course in this e-book as a template.*

*Offer encouragement to myself for having completed the week-long journaling course!*

## Embracing the process

Self-knowledge is a lifelong process. I happen to think the backbone of this process is self-reflection via journaling. The more you can learn to love the process, the less trepidation and procrastination you will feel around setting the pen to paper or the fingers to the keyboard. As with any healthy habit, the more you practice it the more you will experience its positive effects. These positive effects include strengthening of the immune system,

relief of arthritis symptoms, and relief of depression. Some positive effects on my own life have been: finding my voice as a writer, leaving abusive relationships in favor of nurturing relationships, resolving addictions, finding my way into a new personal calling (was a teacher but now a therapist), and discovering my deep preferences on how I want to live my life. I consider journaling to be much like flossing, a process that removes gunk and leaves me clear and clean.

As you go deeper into your journaling, you may find that you refer back to very old entries and make connections with current struggles and endeavors. You could dig into dream journaling. You may also find that journaling nourishes your artistic side or your logical and scientific sides! You could come up with a great idea for a novel or short story out of your journaling. Maybe you'll come to feel more secure in a big career change. Embrace the process!

## Parting words

I chose to write this brief e-book on journaling because I want to help empower you to find out your hopes, dreams, fears, wounds, magnificence, and new ways of being. I want to empower you to step out of old roles and into a brighter future. Also, I work as a therapist and wanted to create a resource for both my clients/future clients as well anyone deciding to pursue their own self-knowledge journey. The focus of my practice is helping the people I work with do what I currently do for them so that they don't need therapy anymore. I hope this e-book helps you toward that end.

I appreciate you taking the time to read this brief guide on journaling for self-knowledge. I encourage you to try out the ideas written here and see how they fit with your life.

All the best in your journaling!