

Navigation by Journaling

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the**thinking**space

Dear Reader

I hope you find this booklet useful. Please pass it on to anyone else you think might benefit.

We're all different, and none of the suggestions will apply to everyone. Use what's helpful and disregard the rest.

I'll be delighted to receive [your comments for improvement](#).

Keeping a journal is a type of coaching conversation with yourself, and you can get a long way on your own. There is however [a special 'alchemy' in having someone listening empathically](#) and without judgement to what you are thinking. Should you wish to supplement journaling with in-person coaching, please [drop me a line](#).

To download any of the other free 'navigation' resources (for yourself, or friends or family) [click here](#):

Navigation for Young Adults

Navigation in Midlife

Navigation by Journaling

Regular blog posts and/or news items are just a [click](#) away.

And you can check out [my Website](#)

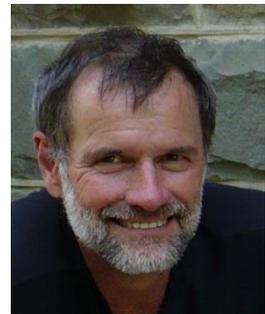
Bon voyage!

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Navigation by Journaling

Our world is an uncertain and complex place, and it keeps changing.

You may be struggling to understand your own feelings, or find your bearings, or make decisions about your direction, or plot your course forward.

Or perhaps you're in a comfort zone, bored, and needing to find new passion?

A journal can help you

A journal can be a tool to;

- ◆ better understand who you are, where you are, and why you are feeling as you are;
- ◆ use to the full the fruits of your learning and experience;
- ◆ dream dreams;
- ◆ decide on priorities and direction;
- ◆ plan the way ahead;
- ◆ monitor your progress.

This guide introduces you to what journaling is, how it helps you, and how to start writing.

What is journaling?

A journal can mean many different things to different people, depending on whether you are a bookkeeper, sailor, parliamentarian, editor, lonely heart, mechanic etc, but this 'navigational' type of journaling is about *recording and reflecting on your personal thoughts, experiences and evolving insights*. It's a conversation with yourself, to *make decisions, plan and enrich your personal growth*.

What's in it for you?

Self-awareness

As you write about your experiences, thoughts and feelings you'll wake up to what is happening inside you. 'Noticing' is a key first step in your journey of personal change. The increased awareness can increase your understanding of what others are experiencing and help you to connect more meaningfully with them.

Healing

Expressive writing can lead to **healing** -- emotionally, psychologically and also physically. Writing about stress and emotions boosts immunity and reduce visits to the doctor. As you translate your experiences into words, the events and emotions become easier to grasp, helping you detach you from mental entanglement in the trauma.

But remember, just venting feelings or again reciting the same story old is not enough. For the health benefits, we must go a step further and *interpret* our experiences.

Creativity

Physically writing your thoughts on paper can **bring to light ideas you never knew you had**.

Ever wondered what it takes to pioneer a breakthrough discovery or achievement? Those who've managed to do so have typically had **"private domains"** (safe spaces and/or inner worlds) where they can think *without feeling critique of any kind*. Nurturing something new first needs you to temporarily (partially) withdraw from the world. You need a space to connect with yourself, to think things through, and possibly to gather yourself before taking that brave decision to buck convention. A journal can be your "private domain" to think and feel without that fear of criticism.

Goals, motivation and mastery

Struggling to achieve your goals? A journal can help you to articulate and refine the goals, and then track your progress towards them. Reflecting on the positive outcomes induces your brain to reward you with shots of serotonin and dopamine – ‘feel-good’ hormones to boost your mood, self-esteem and motivation.

A “near win” can communicate even more than that. “Mastery”, says Sarah Lewis “is in the reaching, not the arriving ... We build out of the unfinished idea ...” Your journal can be a tool to build on that unfinished idea, on the road to mastery.

Learning

You have probably noticed that we learn more from failure or ‘near wins’ than we do from outright success. Reflecting on what “went wrong” can unearth a wealth of learning, and deepen your experience. The cyclical pattern of experience → observation → conceptualisation → experimentation → experience etc. is the characteristic way that we learn as adults. Your journal is a scaffold for making the most of this ongoing learning cycle. In fact, it’s been used for this by educationists for decades.

Happiness

“Yeah . . . whatever!” you’re thinking.

The neural mechanisms of an “upward spiral of happiness” are nevertheless being unravelled. Elements of journaling that feed into this upward spiral include; i) looking for things to be grateful for; ii) giving bad feelings a name; iii) making decisions that (though not perfect) are “good enough”; and iv) attaining your goals.

Where do I find the time?

You don’t need more than 10 minutes a day. You decide. Could the benefits of greater self-awareness, increased motivation and more focused goal setting save you at least 10 minutes a day?

Getting started

Choose your format

Do you prefer the physical act of putting pen to paper? It has stood the test of time. If you do decide to write on paper, consider finding a notebook or journal that you *really* like. Or you can decorate and personalise a cheaper notebook. Having a journal you can view as a friend will help you to think better. Choose a pen too that works well for you, both functionally and aesthetically.

You may prefer an electronic journal, especially if you type faster than you write. Electronic files will likely also be easier to hide from prying eyes. You can type into a Word (or similar) document, use a multi-purpose app such as [Evernote](#), [a specific journaling app](#), or an app for a handwriting device ([Android](#); [iPad](#)), whichever works best for you.

Find the best time for you

Popular times are first thing in the morning or just before bed. Or maybe there's a time that suits you better?

The *purpose* of the journaling can affect the best time for you to do it. Are you **looking to free up new insights**? This happens best at non-optimal times of day i.e. [when you are not at your best](#). If you are not an early bird, you may do better to write first thing in the morning. On the other hand, if *are* a morning person, you may find new insights more easily in the evenings.

Want to work through **an analytic problem**? Pick a convenient time when you will be thinking clearly. This is often an hour or two after waking.

Find the right place

We must feel safe to think well. Find a place where you're comfortable and unlikely to be disturbed. If feasible, use the same place each day.

Ease into it

Journaling mustn't be an imposition.

Start slowly, writing perhaps three days a week. Write for five to 10 minutes and stop when you've had enough. With time, you might find yourself writing for longer.

Don't bust a gut to write every day. Rather recognise the moments when journaling is the most useful e.g. when you *want* to do it. Or when you have to make decisions, or feel down, or full of ideas, or restless, or want to vent your feelings.

Relax

Do what it takes to relax. What would this mean for you? Music? Total quiet? Familiar noises? The outdoors? A pet? Your favourite tea or coffee?

Don't fuss with grammar, spelling, style, handwriting, etc. Waving Tippex while you work through deep feelings or cascading ideas will merely inhibit new insights.

Fill the journal with whatever you like

What would it take to express who you are and what you are thinking and feeling? Draw if you want to, paste things, add quotations, etc.

Stay positive

We are wired for negativity. "The brain is like Velcro for negative experiences, but Teflon for positive ones", says neurophysiologist Rick Hansen. This probably had survival value way back when a sabre toothed tiger could be behind the next bush, but no longer. Keep your mind's ear open for "Velcro" negative thoughts. Think instead of what there is to be grateful for and to consciously savour?

One way to 'rewire' your brain, so that the good stuff sticks, is to follow three simple steps recommended by Hansen:

1. Let positive *facts* become positive *experiences*. (Let yourself feel good when you get something done, or someone is nice to you, or you notice a good quality in yourself.)
2. Savour the positive experience for 10 to 30 seconds. Let it fill your body and be as

intense as possible.

3. Sense that the positive experience is soaking into you, like water into a sponge, becoming a part of you.

Occasionally go over what you've written

Celebrate progress. What has become clearer? What's worked and what hasn't? What patterns can you discern, especially in your behaviour? What does this mean for the way ahead?

Keep the journal safe

To be completely honest in your journal you must be sure others won't see it. You'll write more freely that way.

If you use an electronic journal, password protect your computer and the document, and be wary of cloud storage.

What do I write about, and how?

There are countless ways to write and you might do so differently on different days or for different purposes. You might even keep more than one journal at the same time; one for thoughts and feelings as they come to you at any time, and another focused on specific purposes (e.g. navigating a transition).

Start Writing!

Just let it flow. Don't edit or censor. There are no rules and you can start in a different way every time, if you want to.

Is something burning right through you? Do you want answers but feel confused? Start by writing down the mundane facts and events. As you write, things can loosen up, leading to insights you wouldn't otherwise have had.

If there is nothing top of mind, you could start with:

- **Recent events and experiences;**
 - What's happened since you last journaled? Good things? Something to be grateful for?
 - What have you learned since last time?
 - Progress made?
 - Small or quick wins?
 - Mistakes?
 - Difficult or painful events?
 - If you could repeat a recent event, what would you do differently, and why?
 - What more can you learn?
- **Your feelings**
 - Put them down on paper and see where that leads.

Be honest

You won't learn much by bluffing yourself. Write what really happened and what you actually thought and felt. Remember, you're the only person who'll see it.

It can still sometimes be very difficult to face up to parts of ourselves, even when there's no-one around to impress. When you do manage to do so, acknowledge to yourself the courage it took. Don't judge yourself. *Do forgive yourself.*

Take on the tough stuff

Let your journal have it! Let it all out. The journal will soak it all up without judging.

Talk tough. It will help to blow off steam, and bring calm and clarity after the fight/flight/freeze of the storm. This opens up space to detach from the immediate emotions, to stand in the shoes of others, and maybe see if they could have a point...

Two specific techniques to consider

1. Release your creative juices

This approach is commonly called 'Morning Pages' (as described in [a book by Julia Cameron](#)), because you deliberately write when you are *not at your best*. This helps new ideas to surface before your brain has had a chance to reboot the same tired old stories that you repeat to yourself each day (as we all do).

First thing in the morning will thus work best for those who are **not** morning people. On the other hand, early birds might find that an "Evening Edition" works better (at a time when our ego's defences have started to slip).

Write in a stream-of-consciousness manner about whatever comes into your mind: petty worries, soaring plans, angry tirades. Just write. It's a space for inspiration to surface.

Write longhand.

There is no time limit, but Julia Cameron insists that you fill *exactly* three sides of A4 paper – no more and no less. The reason? "*The second page-and-a-half comes harder, but often contains pay dirt*". On the other hand, more than three pages carries a risk of self-involvement and narcissism.

2. Connect more deeply with yourself

Whereas 'Morning Pages' aim to free up creative insights by writing when you're not at your best and without thinking very much about what you have written, so-called proprioceptive writing asks direct questions of the writing and can help you *listen deeply* to yourself. That is, you *reflect* on the thoughts you write down.

"Proprioception" is a technical term that refers to our sense of the position of our body's parts in relation to each other. Proprioceptive *writing* thus helps us discover how the various parts of our makeup fit together. It is about the *synthesis and integration* of emotions and imagination, the generation of authentic insights and a strengthened sense of self.

How do you do this? [The originators](#) suggest that you find a quiet environment where you won't be disturbed for 25 minutes, and that you light a candle and, yes,

turn on Baroque music. The candle is to create a sense of special place and help you to focus, while the rhythms of Baroque music have been reported to increase focus and wellbeing.

Write down the first thought that enters your mind; what you're thinking, what you're feeling, what interests you, what concerns you. Don't worry about grammar, eloquence or style.

Whenever something you write catches your attention ask yourself: "*What do I mean by . . .*" This will help you amplify that thought and allow you to reflect on it more meaningfully. Imagine you're an archaeologist on a dig, curiously examining each new thought, without judgement.

At the end of the session read aloud to yourself what you've written so you can hear your thoughts again in your own voice.

Bon voyage!