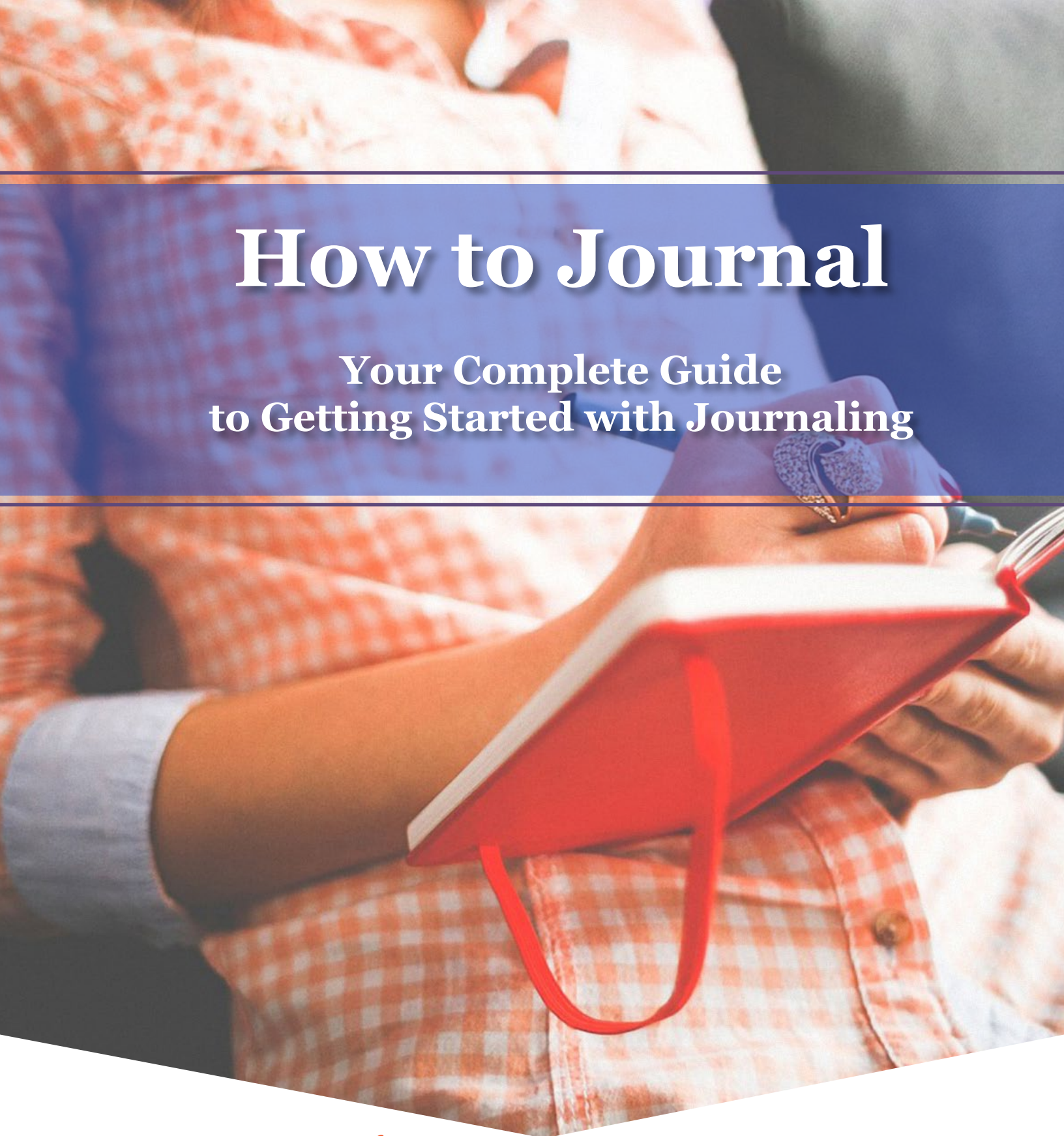




How to Journal

**Your Complete Guide
to Getting Started with Journaling**



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How to Journal

Your Complete Guide to Getting Started with Journaling



Do you want to learn how to journal, but are unsure where to start or what to write about? Maybe you have heard of creative journaling and are curious about what it is? Perhaps you are a writer and want to journal to deepen your craft?

This comprehensive “How to Journal” article will answer all of your questions about what journal writing is, how you can use it, and what benefits you can experience from this type of writing. It also includes many journal writing prompts to help you get started. Lastly, while journal writing is typically a solitary act, you don’t have to journal alone or in isolation. This article will tell you where you can get some help and support for your journal writing, including the option of engaging in a journal writing community and group.

This Article Covers

[What is Journaling?](#)

[What Can I Use Journaling For?](#)

[What are the Benefits of Journal Writing?](#)

[What is the Difference Between a Journal and a Diary?](#)

[How to Start a Journal](#)

[What is a Journaling Writing Ritual](#)

[What Do I Write in my Journal](#)

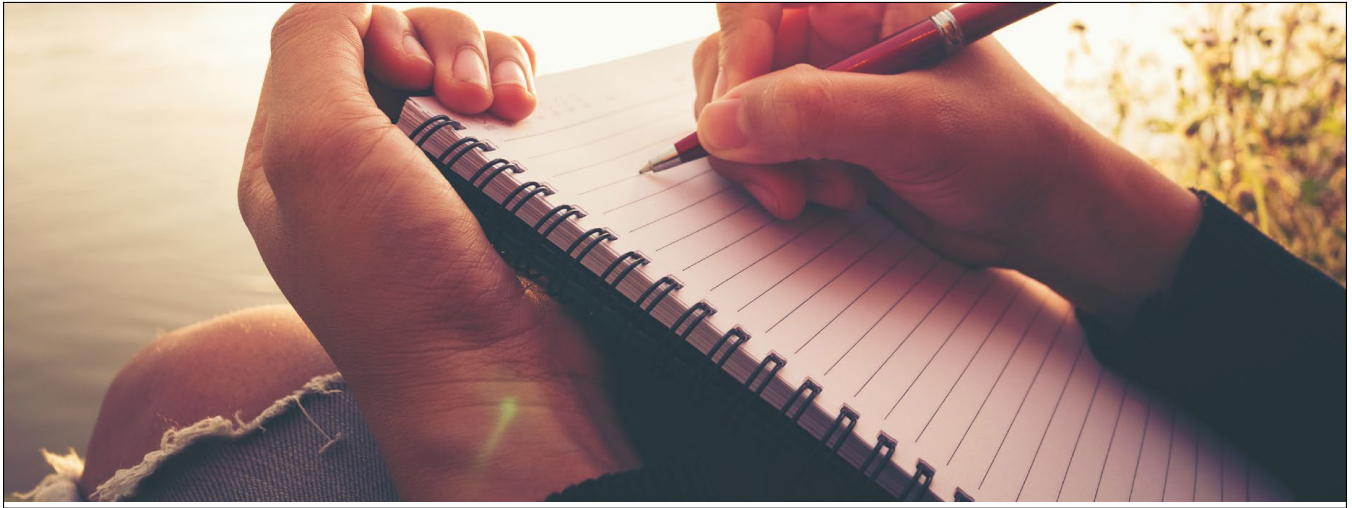
[How Often Should I Write in my Journal](#)

[Do You Need to Write Regularly in a Journal?](#)

[How Do You Get into the Habit of Writing in your Journal Consistently?](#)

[What Help and Support Can I Get for my Journal Writing?](#)

[How to Journal – In Conclusion](#)



What is Journaling?

Journaling is the practice of taking time for yourself to write and reflect on your thoughts, feelings and life experiences. While there are many suggestions for how to journal and what to write about, the beauty of journal writing is you can do it in your own way and really make it your own creative and life enhancing practice.

There are lots of people who write in a journal. I recently heard that 16% of the world's population regularly writes in a journal. I don't have a research source for this circulated fact but you could loosely test this claim yourself by asking a group of friends or family if they write in a journal and see what percentage of them say yes.

Each person might give a slightly different answer to the question, what is journaling but in essence, journaling is the simple and profound act of capturing and understanding our lives through expressive writing and story. Expressive writing includes writing about our thoughts and feelings while gaining self-awareness and new discoveries along the way. Journaling is all about exploring and enriching life through narrative, words and creative self-expression through writing.

Journaling is...

- a powerful tool for personal growth, self-discovery, improved health and creative self-expression
- a fun and creative life enhancing practice
- used by many successful people, including Oprah and Jack Canfield (author of *Chicken Soup for the Soul* books), to achieve success in life and work

"Journal writing is one of the rare forms of writing in which freedom of form and content support each other magically." – STEPHANIE DOWRICK

What Can I Use Journaling For?

You can use journal writing to get to know yourself better, to solve problems, make life decisions, improve your health, increase feelings of gratitude and joy. You can journal to heal from stressful life circumstances, to deal with grief and loss, or other life transitions. You can journal for the pure love it! Journaling is a fun, nourishing and creative practice that simply requires something to write with and write on (pen and notebook, loose paper, cue cards, you can choose your journaling tools!).

People use journal writing in different ways for a variety of reasons. One person might journal to heal a broken heart and their journaling might take the form of an unsent letter, expressing all they wish they might have said to that person who is no longer in their life. Someone else might be journaling to celebrate their accomplishments and successes and they make a list of their recent points of pride in the pages of their journal.

You can have various goals and intentions for your journaling. There are also a wide variety of journaling methods and techniques you can use to get the most out of your journaling and use it for what matters most to you at this time in your life.

What are the Benefits of Journal Writing?

There are many evidence-based benefits of journal writing from over 30 years of research in the expressive writing field. Yes, journal writing is a field of work!

- People use the journaling process for many reasons, including to:
- stimulate a healthier mind and body
- vent and express thoughts and feelings in a healthy, constructive manner
- increase self-awareness
- create clarity for decision-making
- track progress and personal growth
- celebrate successes
- heal emotional pain and trauma
- manage stress and prevent burnout
- gain broader and multiple perspectives
- practice writing in a non-judgmental setting
- improve creative thinking
- preserve memories
- get closer to God or a divine energy source

Today, journaling is widely accepted as a means for cultivating wellness within a whole person health approach which includes the emotional, physical, psychological and spiritual dimensions of well-being. Journaling is being used across various disciplines, such as education, psychology, leadership, business, health, creative writing, coaching and counselling fields, as a powerful tool for learning and growth.

What is the Difference Between a Journal and a Diary?

While for some people there might not be much notable difference between a journal and a diary, I do think of them somewhat distinctly.

A Diary

A diary is more like a record of a person's daily activities and events during the day. It might read more like a log book or a newspaper, for example:

Today, I got up at 7:00 am and began my day with meditating for half an hour. Then I had my first cup of coffee and made my list of things to do for the day. After that, I had a shower, ate breakfast and got ready for work.

A Journal

A journal is much more personal than a diary. A journal is expressive by nature and it contains feelings, emotions, problems, ponderings and it is more reflective on the meaning of life being lived. For example:

When I woke up this morning, I felt really excited about the trip we were about to take. It reminds me of the time we were about to leave on a family holiday to Prince Edward Island years ago. My parents had worked hard (and argued lots) to get the car and trailer all packed up for the two-day road trip ahead. Back then I didn't appreciate how much work it took to get a family ready for a holiday until I became a parent myself.

You can see that there is subtle difference. A diary captures the details of a day whereas a journal captures more of the heart of our experiences, our memories, feelings, and insights that flow from the many moments in our lives.

The reality is that people often use these terms interchangeably. What might be a diary for one person, is called a journal by another. What you choose to call it is far less important than the actual act of you writing down your thoughts and feelings on the page, so that you can gain the many benefits of this expressive practice in your life.



How to Start a Journal

Get Organized

One of the first things to do when you want to start a journal is to get your journaling tools organized. You simply need a pen and a journal, a notebook of some form, to get started.

It can be fun to pick out your favourite pen and an inspiring journal. You can look online or go into any book, stationary or office supply store and you can find all kinds of journals, pens, markers and other things that you might like to use in your journal such as stickers or other creative touches.

Over time, you can experiment with your journaling tools. Do you want to have blank pages or lined? Do you want a small journal or a large sketchbook style journal? Do you want to use the same style journal or mix it up and try something new each time you fill a journal and need to begin a new one?

Sometimes people use loose leaf paper and put their journaling pages in a binder, or write small entries on cue cards, or use big 18 x 24 pages of paper for larger visual journaling entries. There are mixed media art journals and more.



Just Write!

The key is to pick some simple journaling tools to start with – a pen and notebook – and start writing. Your writing will teach you what you need. For example, I used to write in a small lined journal and over the years, my writing longed for larger, open, clear spaces to fill and I now use an 8 ½ by 11 blank page sketchbook, spiral bound (I keep my pilot pen in the spine of the journal).

Find your own tools and make your own way as you write. The only way to journaling, is to write. Then write some more.

Whether you are an avid journal writer, someone who used to journal and got away from it, or have never written in a journal before.

“There is a Spanish proverb which says: there is no road, we make the road as we walk. I would say the same thing about journal writing: we make the path as we write.” – CHRISTINA BALDWIN



What is a Journaling Writing Ritual

Dr. James Pennebaker, author of *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering from Trauma & Emotional Upheaval*, suggests some of the conditions that help enhance the expressive writing process. His research shows that creating a journal writing ritual is something that is very beneficial.

Being focused, non-judgmental, and connected to your interior world fosters deeper writing -but it's not a frame of mind that everyone can simply switch on and off. The idea behind the ritual is to create a unique environment and/or behavior which help you expeditiously sink into the best journal writing mindset that you can. The purpose of the ritual is to take you away from everyday life. Your ritual are the cues you can create for yourself which help you become relaxed, alert, and reflective.

How do you Create a Journal Writing Ritual?

Here are some suggestions that may work, but just as almost everything about journal writing is individual, the ritual that you create to transition into deeper journal writing is uniquely yours.

- Select some music that creates a sense of serenity. Play it for five minutes, focusing on only listening to the music-not going through mail, straightening out your desk-perhaps closing your eyes and listening. You may want to have just one piece of music that you use each time as your centering pre-writing ritual, or perhaps a selection of three or four pieces for some variety.
- Begin with several minutes of a meditation or prayer that you have written just for the occasion or one that you create spontaneously each time.
- Write in a place that has the kind of environment that is conducive for your journal writing: by a bright and sunny window; or by a softly lit corner nestled in a cozy chair.
- Brew a cup of tea or coffee, or pour yourself some fresh juice. Perhaps a glass of wine? Spend a few minutes holding the cup, feeling the warmth, smelling the aromas of your drink and deeply enjoy those sensations.
- Light a candle and while lighting the candle say an affirmation, a prayer, or a wish.
- Journal at approximately the same time each day-not perhaps at the same hour each day-but at the same time in your daily routine-perhaps a half an hour before you go to bed-even if some nights you go to bed at 10 pm and other times at midnight.

The trick, of course, is to find the cues that help you settle in quickly. Initially, experiment with different rituals to see which feels best and then stick with the practice once you have found one that you like. Remember to use as many of your senses—smell, sight, touch, hearing and taste— as you can when creating your own centering ritual.

What Do I Write in my Journal

You can write about your day including your thoughts, feelings, problems, challenges, upsets, joys, successes and dreams. You can write about anything you want to write about. For example, here are some journaling prompts to help you get started:

- Right now, I am feeling...
- Right now, I notice...
- Right now, I am thinking about...
- So far, the best part about my week is...

You can write about what you don't really want to write about and explore your resistance. Resistance offers you information about areas you might be feeling stuck, or perhaps procrastinating with, or simply not quite sure how to proceed. Here are some journaling prompts to play with around this:

- At the moment, I don't really want to write about (and then write about it anyways)...
- I am feeling resistant because...
- If I wasn't feeling resistant, what might be different in my life right now...

You can free write (simply go to the page and start writing) or you can do more structured journal writing activities such as using prompts. There are many journal writing techniques and methods such as mind maps, cluster drawings, dialogue writing, captured moments, poetic writing and more that you can learn about and use to keep your journal writing fresh and interesting.

You can access our free [7 Servings of Journal Juice](#) for new ideas on what to write about in your journal. You will receive journal writing prompts, exercises, tips and our inspiring Journaling Museletter.



How Often Should I Write in my Journal

There are no rules about how often you should write in your journal. Like anything, the more often you do something that is good for you, the more benefits you can get from it. For example, if you wanted to experience the many benefits of exercise to your health and wellness, you would not go for one walk around the block and expect to experience significant health benefits from it.

The same is true for journaling. While that one walk would have offered you in the moment benefits, time to relax, a feel good feeling from moving your body, some fresh air and more, the same is true for journaling. You could take 10 minutes to write about your thoughts, feelings and life observations, and gain a sense of relief, renewal and replenishment from the act of writing.



Journal Regularly

Journaling can also be done regularly, even daily. Much like any other activity you might do that is good for you, like brushing your teeth or meditating or eating a healthy diet. Journaling can be a healthy daily habit.

Set a Timer

I often facilitate timed journal writing exercises in workshops and retreats that I offer, for example within my [Transformational Writing for Wellness Salon](#), a 6 week group coaching program that takes people into the heart and art of transformational journaling. So often, I have had people say “I can’t believe how much I wrote in just 5 minutes” or “I can’t believe I gained that new insights when I just wrote for 7 minutes!”

Journaling to Cope

Many people only write in their journals when they are going through difficult times. Once things are going better, they stop writing. This is also a valuable way to use a journal as a life companion for helping to cope during stressful or troubled times.

The key is not to get too caught up in “should” – I should journal today. I should journal more often. Because shoulds can open the door for negative self-talk and feelings of inadequacy and shame. Your journaling practice is best treated more like a kind friend. You get to it because you want to, because it is an enjoyable, or at least helpful, relaxing experience.

Do You Need to Write Regularly in a Journal?

It's a question that most journal writers face at some point. Does it matter that you write regularly in your journal? Whether you write often depends on your purpose for writing. Is it to preserve memories? To sort out issues? To track physical or emotional, spiritual, or intellectual progress? Track health symptoms?

If journal writing is pleasurable, then writing is its own reward. If journal writing becomes a task you “should” do, rather than something that is internally compelling, then you are more likely to write less consistently. So part of the issue can be reframed to ask, “How do I make journal writing pleasurable?” The answer to this question can help you find your own way to make journaling a consistent and enjoyable habit (that you engage with for reasons that are meaningful to you.)

How Do You Get into the Habit of Writing in your Journal Consistently?

If you do want to write in your journal on a regular basis and truly create the journaling habit, here are a few ideas that might help you to keep writing consistently:

- Make your journal writing more upbeat. Review the good things that have happened in your day—your attitude, your progress toward a goal, a minor victory, even a two-minute interaction with someone that went well. Remind yourself about the good stuff in your life and your good qualities.
- When you do have difficult issues in your life that need to be resolved—and who doesn't?—consider the time that you write in your journal as an oasis of self-nurturing in your day. It's a time to vent, rant, reflect, and process just for you.
- Write at the same time every day, if possible, thus incorporating your writing practice into a daily routine.
- Think of writing a journal entry as the lowest cost and highest benefit way of taking care of your health. Remember that writing about meaningful events or activities in your life has been proven to positively impact your overall health without major cost of time or money and without having to leave your home!
- Write a one-word journal entry that captures your day. It's a challenge to come up with that one word and you can think about it while you are doing some mindless life maintenance activity—like flossing your teeth or taking out the garbage or folding the clothes. Once you have determined that word, writing it in your journal entry takes almost no time.



Back to the question does it really does it matter that you write consistently?

It only matters that you write consistently so you don't stop keeping a journal, and so when you re-read your journal, there are enough entries to retain the continuity of the storyline of your life.

Your capacity to write consistently in your journal will be determined by your feeling of satisfaction and by doing what's right for you. While you are writing and when you finish, notice how you feel. Did you like the process? Did you feel relaxed and soothed during or after writing? Did you feel at times frustrated, angry, confused, despairing? This whole spectrum of emotions is simply part of the process of journal writing. I know that for me (Ruth) I do feel better most of the time after I write, like I've jettisoned some burden and/or relived a pleasurable part of my day. **When it comes to journaling, think consistency versus frequency.** Ask yourself: What will help me journal consistently over time? Sometimes the *frequency* of your writing might be daily or weekly or more or less, but *consistently*, over time, it is something you do.

What Help and Support Can I Get for my Journal Writing?

One of the best ways to get help and support for your journal writing is to be part of a community with fellow journal writers, where there are regular opportunities to connect, learn and be inspired about journaling. If people like yoga, they connect in yoga communities, like meditation or scrapbooking or running, the instinct is to find supportive communities who share our passion or interest in something, so that we can learn and grow together.

Our journal writing community is for extroverts and introverts alike. Perhaps you want the inspiration and support of a community, but would rather sit back quietly and take it all in. Or maybe you want to chat with fellow journal writers in live time on our monthly telechats with guest experts. You can gain help and support for your journal writing in your own way.



Join our Online Community

Knowing the power of having a community of fellow journal writers to be part of, the [International Association for Journal Writing](#) offers a learning and inspiration community for journal writers worldwide. We offer monthly online writing circles, interviews with guest experts in the field of journaling and expressive writing, courses, journaling tools, e-books and more.

We also have our [Journal Writing Tribe Facebook group](#) where you can connect with fellow journal writers, receive journal writing tips and prompts, all in support of you and your own unique journal writing journey. Everyone is welcome!

Treat Yourself to a Journal Writing Retreat

Lastly, you might want to join one of our virtual [Renew You Writing Retreat](#) where you can take 3 hours for yourself to journal in a guided and nourishing way to either kick-start or reinvigorate your journaling practice. This retreat offers you time for your own creative self-care and renewal!

"Wow! What an awesome experience! I must admit I was a tad bit skeptical about an online retreat. But woah! Was I wrong! The Renew You Writing Retreat was so invigorating, uplifting, therapeutic, inspirational....just plain awesomesauce. Have you ever had an experience like that? You go in a little skeptical and come out blown away? Have you had the experience of being deeply inspired through writing and sharing with others? If not, you're missing out! Thank you, Lynda, for creating such a wonderful space and experience." AIRIAL W. DANDRIDGE, CERTIFIED LIFE COACH

How to Journal – In Conclusion

If you've read this far, I know you are passionate or at least curious about the many benefits of journal writing. Journaling is always an empowering experience because you are always the expert of your own experiences. Journaling lets you capture those experiences while exploring both the known and yet to be discovered aspects of both your inner and outer worlds.

As a Registered Social Worker and Certified Co-Active Life Coach, I (Lynda) have been immersed in fields of work that are about human transformation, growth, change and wellness for the past 30 years. I have learned many different tools and techniques for self-care, healing and growth through my studies and my own first-hand experience. I always come back to journaling as my go to practice that helps me to live an intentional, healthy and happy life. I know it has helped many people to do the same! Including you, perhaps?

There is only one way to experience the many benefits of journal writing and that is to pick up your pen and write.

"Writing was the healing place where I could collect bits and pieces, where I could put them together again...written words change us all and make us more than we could ever be without them."~ BELL HOOKS



May your own journaling support you to be more than you could ever be without it!

Authors: [Lynda Monk, Director of IAJW](#) and [Ruth Folit, Founder of IAJW](#), partnered to write this How to Journal article, attempting to answer some of the most common questions that new and, in some cases, even seasoned journal writers have.