

# Journaling for reflection and critical thinking

Assigning journal-writing can get our students reflecting on their learning processes, connecting other aspects of their lives to what's happening in and between their classes, and making meaning with the content of our courses (Hubbs and Brand, 2005). While journal writing is just one path to these outcomes, it has the benefit of supporting students taking responsibility for their own learning and shaping knowledge as they see fit (O'Connell and Dymont, 2005). These latter outcomes are key to student engagement and tend to be hard to design for.

## WHAT DOES A LEARNING JOURNAL LOOK LIKE?

Like personal journals, journals used in learning processes take many forms — the most successful may adopt different forms for different entries, experimenting with form in supporting their reflective processes. Some students will be familiar with journals as spaces to jot down observations (like lab or field notebooks), others will gravitate toward descriptive writing, or simply logging their experiences. Offering some structure to prompt critical reflection is important. Sometimes a simple writing prompt will be enough: What do you think about x, y, z? Where do you see the principles of x,y,z reflected elsewhere in the world around us? Other times, you'll want to encourage a more structured process: Transcribe your reading notes into your journal and use different colored pens/highlighters to mark connections you notice. See [this short guide](#) for more ideas and [this sample journal assignment](#).

## ASSESSING (OR NOT) STUDENT JOURNALS

One of the stickier issues that researchers debate with journaling assignments is if and how to assess students' reflective writing. Oftentimes the writing is so personal — do we have the time to give the feedback it deserves? And how do we assign grades to that sort of thing? If one goal of a journaling assignment is to allow students to think-by-composing, is there a need for an audience other than the student?

Scholars Delaura Hubbs and Charles Brand suggest that “if the reflective journal is to be used for the purpose of assessment, it should serve as a means for assessing student learning, not for judging student performance” (page 61) and offer a rubric that teachers and students can use to

dialogue about the quality of reflective journal writing (page 67). While theirs is the best assessment option I could find while researching this topic, I'd advocate for allowing learning journals to remain private and process-oriented for students. Instead of reading and assigning grades to student journals, require that they draw on their journals for other assignments — they might even quote themselves, or track their thoughts on a topic over time and incorporate this into a larger course project. The simplest approach here might be to require students to “revise and publish” a few journal entries, allowing the instructor to assess and give feedback to the student, supporting them in further developing their reflective processes without complicating the trust and vulnerability a student may establish in journal writing.

## TOOLS FOR JOURNALING

In keeping with the value of journals as student-led learning tools, the best tools for journaling are highly flexible and customizable. For digital journals, try a note-taking app like [Bear](#) (for Mac and iOS), which can be used on laptops and mobile (what good's a journal if you can't take it with you?) and allows for tagging to help organize notes. [Simplenote](#) is a good free option, not limited to Mac users, and has the additional capability for collaboration on notes. Both apps allow users to publish their notes in multiple formats — helpful if students are sharing parts of their journals.

Paper, handwritten journals are a great option too. Look for “dot grid” notebooks, customizable in that the dots can act as lines of any size for writing, guides for creating tables, or largely ignored if the journal involves sketching. A blank notebook is my preference — lots of space, and many directions, for thinking on the page.

## REFERENCES

Hubbs, Delaura and Charles F. Brand (2010). “[Learning From the Inside Out: A Method for Analyzing Reflective Journals in the College Classroom](#).” *Journal of Experiential Education*, 33(1). 56-71.

O'Connell, Tim and Janet Dymont (2006). “[Reflections on Using Journals in Higher Education: A Focus Group Discussion with Faculty](#).” *Assessment and Evaluation in Higher Education*, 31(6). 671-691.