



Journals

What is a journal?

You may be required to keep a journal as part of the assessment of a course to record your thoughts about your learning within a course or professional setting. A journal is usually written regularly over a specified period of time and is a systematic record of factual information about events, dates and people or a record of notes and ideas about your reading and research linked to a course. In journals you draw on lectures and wider reading, describe events, experiences and issues associated with your study or professional placement and also analyse and reflect on them. They are a more detailed account of events and situations which record observations, anecdotes, conversations, as well as your subjective impressions of these.

What is a journal used for?

Journals can be used to:

- record your development and progress through a course;
- process your learning by focussing on particular readings or issues and recording your insights and questions;
- increase your self-awareness through the process of observing and clarifying perceptions, feelings and thoughts;
- evaluate your personal and professional growth and examine your data, deal with issues or problems that are raised by it and identify alternative solutions;
- gather documentation that you can critically reflect on and incorporate into an assignment;
- demonstrate that you have been thinking about the process of your learning and the development of your understanding;
- explore ideas or issues that are widely debated and discuss the various arguments associated with them, and
- reflect on your own observations and interpretations of events that allows you to examine your experiences to understand them better.

How to write a journal

You may include descriptive, analytical or reflective elements of the journal.

Descriptive elements

The **descriptive** elements in our journal will be of particular events, experiences or issues you choose to record. You need to do this part regularly and as close in time to your experience as possible so you can recall the details well. Jot down key ideas or words in a notebook so that you don't forget the details and then write up the entry within a few days.



Choose from the following questions to help you with your writing:

- What was the setting? What were the circumstances?
- What happened? What was my role?
- What did I do? How did I respond/react?
- What were the key points?

Reflective and analytical elements

The **analytical** and **reflective** elements will be about the issues, experiences or events and you need to show a deeper level of thought. To be **critically** reflective, your journal needs to analyse your experiences and record any shifts in your views. Sometimes you will be asked to identify and challenge your underlying assumptions, beliefs and views through your journal writing. At other times you may use your journal to explore how you could try to bring about a change and afterwards reflect on what happened.

Reflective writing is done after you have had time to think about the implications of your experience in relation to the ideas and theories you are studying. Some of the following questions may help you with this writing:

- What were the important elements of the experience, event or issue?
- Why did I behave as I did?
- What was I thinking and feeling at the time about the experience, event or issue?
- What do I think and feel now about what happened? Why?
- What should I be aware of if a similar situation occurs?
- What did I learn? What insights did I gain? How or why was this significant for me?
- What aspects of my practice or learning do I want to focus on?
- How can I apply my theoretical knowledge to this situation?
- Have my assumptions and perspectives changed as a result of this experience? How?
- How can I apply what I have learned to my life or future career?

Reflective summary

If a **reflective summary** is required, you need to examine your journal entries as a whole and identify issues or patterns that are significant or recur throughout the journal. The journal itself is organised chronologically, listing the events and thoughts that occurred over a period of time. The summative paper, however, is usually organised on the basis of **themes** identified in the journal. This means that before writing the summative paper, you will need to go back over your journal and underline or note the main themes and patterns of thought, as well as key insights and implications.

Some questions that will help you with this process are:

- What are some of the recurring issues, problems and insights in my journal entries?
- What significant issue, problem or insight is recorded in my journal?
- Is there a pattern to my responses to these issues, problems and insights? What is this pattern?
- Is there any evidence of changes in my knowledge, perspectives or skills over the time I kept the journal? Did these changes show any clear pattern? Were the changes associated with any particular kinds of experiences or insights?



Your summative paper needs to explore the development of each theme in terms of the experiences, knowledge, insights and ideas that relate to it. To do this you will need to draw on the entries related to the main themes and link them to your classes, readings and experiences to show the development of your thinking on issues. A lecturer will be looking for evidence of development of your ideas and the identification of the factors that have contributed to this development. With this in mind, your writing will be more authentic if you use quotes or extracts from your own journal entries to demonstrate this.

Further tips for journal writing

- It is important to keep in mind who will read your journal, so that confidentiality can be maintained. Sometimes your lecturer will use the journal to set up a dialogue with you by providing you with feedback on your ideas. At other times you will be asked to use your entries as a source of discussion with another student or 'critical friend' in workshops or tutorials. Be aware of these possible audiences when you are writing and maintain the anonymity of those you are writing about.
- If you are having difficulty thinking about a topic to write on, you can try to focus on one event or interaction and set yourself a 15-20 minute time limit to write freely on it.
- Before writing their entries some students find it helpful to talk out their ideas first with a friend to help them plan what they are going to write. Other students like to record themselves explaining their ideas and then listen back to the recording to write.
- You may need to organise your journal so that it allows for both initial writing and writing that occurs at a later date when you return to reflect on your documentation and analyse your data. For example you might leave a wide margin to allow for notes to be made later during the analysis stage or have one page for description of the acts and use the opposite page for interpretation and analysis. It is useful to date and label your entries so that it is easier to locate previous entries when it comes to writing up an assignment.
- It might be helpful to think about the practicalities of writing in your journal. If you will not be using a laptop or electronic device and you plan to write while you are on a practicum, you will probably want to use a medium-sized hard cover book that is easily transported. Hard-cover books are durable and have the advantage that you can keep all of your writing together in one place.

Through the journal keeping process you are developing lifelong learning skills in being a 'reflective practitioner' and drawing on a range of communication strategies in the process.



References

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