

Journal-Writing Guide

.... I have as much difficulty as ever in expressing myself clearly and concisely; and this difficulty has caused me a very great loss of time; but it has had the compensating advantage of forcing me to think long and intently about every sentence, and thus I have been often led to see errors in reasoning and in my own observations or those of others.

There seems to be a sort of fatality in my mind leading me to put at first my statement and proposition in a *wrong or awkward* form. Formerly I used to think about my sentences before writing them down; but for several years I have found that it saves time to *scribble in a vile hand* whole pages as quickly as I possibly can, contracting half the words; and then correct deliberately. Sentences thus scribbled down are often better ones than I could have written deliberately.

Charles Darwin
Autobiography, 1876
(emphasis added)

In this class, journals will provide the place for you to "scribble in a vile hand" those "wrong or awkward" statements that many of us (including Darwin) produce when we are beginning to work through new ideas. Here are some suggestions for getting the most out of your journal.

Purpose: To make "wrong or awkward" statements

The purpose of these journals is to get you actively engaging with the material covered in lectures, readings, and discussions and to practice thinking and writing like a professional studying behavior. Some of your journal entries will be written in response to specific questions. Others will be a more general response to issues raised in lecture, reading, or discussion. Below are examples of the kinds of entries you might use. Don't feel limited by this list; experiment with what works best for you.

Ask questions about a lecture, reading, or discussion--and then write out possible answers or ideas about how you might figure out the answer. You might want to mark passages to write about as you are taking notes during lecture.

Define terms in your own words.

Reconstruct the logical argument(s) of a lecture, reading, or discussion in your own words. Write a letter explaining what you're learning in class to your uncle Herkimer who only made it through high school. (Dear Uncle Herkimer ...)

Summarize a lecture, reading, or discussion. What was the conclusion? Does the evidence support that conclusion? What were the strongest and weakest arguments? What problems were left unresolved? How can this material be applied to other situations?

Discuss how your own experiences (in other classes, in social or family situations, etc.) relate to a particular topic in behavior.

Record idle thoughts and crazy ideas sparked by lecture, discussion, or readings.

Record your response to what happened during a discussion. Did your ideas change? If not, why not? If so, what arguments swayed you? Where had your previous reasoning been faulty? Record thoughts about writing. When is it a useful learning tool--and when is it not?

Process: "scribble in a vile hand"

The best time to write in your journal is when the ideas are still fresh--this means while reading or shortly after leaving lecture or discussion. Try to write without thinking about Writing. This means being uncritical (i.e., allow yourself to have the ideas before you attack them) and not worrying about the mechanics of writing (e.g., spelling, grammar, or presentation). Feel free to interrupt yourself in the middle of a thought, but as much as possible try to write in complete sentences so that you are sure to work out the logical connections between ideas. At the end of an entry, review it for a few moments and synthesize your major thoughts into a summary statement or a list of questions.

Journal entries are your way (and mine) of making sure that you are learning from lectures, readings, and discussions. Be sure to write regularly and to spend time on each entry. You should write at least 57 pages per week (3-5 pages typed). At minimum, this should include entries in response to 1) discussion readings and 2) at least two lectures per week.

Please remember the following guidelines when writing in your journals:

- Date entries
- Title entries with the source of inspiration (i.e., the title of lecture, reading, or discussion).
- Write either on loose-leaf paper or on only one side of the paper in a spiral notebook to facilitate peer responses.

Peer response

Once a week you will exchange journals with a classmate and respond in writing to each other's ideas. By setting up a dialogue with a classmate, you will get feedback on your ideas and learn from the insights of your classmates. As the semester continues, you may want to change the way you respond as you realize what kind of responses have been most helpful to you. However, I list below examples of the kinds of responses you might use to get started. Again, don't feel limited by this list.

Agree with an entry--and explain why you agree or expand upon their reasoning.

- Disagree with an entry. Show where you think the writer's logic is flawed and explain how you think it *really* works.
 - * Expand upon an entry. What is the next step in the logic? What are other applications that the writer hasn't considered?
 - Record thoughts sparked by reading their entry. This may mean essentially writing a journal entry in response to the writer's initial entry. See the list of journal entry suggestions above.
- 0 Answer a question posed by the writer, even if they already tried to answer it themselves.

Whatever the format, the most important thing is to spend time thinking about your response.

Responding to another learner's ideas will help you to learn the material--and thoughtful comments show respect for the writer. Also, please abide by the following guidelines as you respond to journals.

- Be kind. You don't have to agree with the writer, but *disagree respectfully*.
- * Read as a reader, not as an English teacher. Remember that these are informal, thought-generating entries. Do not line edit. Instead, respond to the writer's thoughts.
- Date entries.
- Sign your responses, so that your classmate will know to whom they should direct follow-up questions or responses and so that I can check that you have done peer responses.
- * Make sure that the inspiration for the response is clear. Either write on the opposite page or clip the loose-leaf response to the relevant entry.

Evaluation

Once a week, after the journals include peer responses, you will turn them in to me. I will spot-read them--to make sure that you are doing the work and to respond as above. I will be buried in paper if I read all of the journal entries every week, so be sure to indicate any entries to which you would particularly like a response from me. At minimum I will always read those entries. The journals will be evaluated on the basis of whether you are engaging with and thinking about material covered in lectures, readings, discussions, and your peer's writings. If you are writing regularly (and in sufficient quantity) and using that writing to engage with the material, work out ideas, and figure out what you do and don't understand, then you will get full credit.

Journalling revisions and other responses to evaluations

Thanks for putting time and an honest appraisal into the evaluations last week. I have tried to address the major issues that you thought could use improvement below. If there are other things that you think could be improved, please let me know in writing or in person. Also, please give me feedback about whether you like these "improvements".

Journal deadlines: Several of you expressed concern about the frequency at which journals are collected and the time-pressure that subsequently builds up around journal-writing and peer responding. The point of the journals is to give you a chance to explore your understanding of new concepts and to practice applying those concepts. If the frequent deadlines mean that you are writing in response to pressure to meet a deadline and not in order to play with the ideas, then I think the frequent deadline is counterproductive.

However, I have mixed feelings about collecting the journals less often because: 1) I want to maximize the benefit of discussion by making sure that you have all done and thought about the reading and 2) I'm worried that if writing a journal entry and reading the response to that entry are too separated in time, then the benefits of getting reader response will decrease.

I would therefore like to try having you turn in the journals every other week, and see whether you all still seem to be coming to class prepared to discuss. Let's also change the deadline for exchanging journals with peers from Monday to Wednesday so that you have more time to read and respond to your peer's journals. So from now on (or until I revise the assignment again!),

Wednesday 16 October Journal to peer
Monday 21 October PR journal to me
Wednesday 23 October SK return journals (hopefully, if I can manage to read them that fast)
Wednesday 30 October Journal to peer
Monday 4 November PR journal to me

Wednesday 6 November SK return journals (hopefully)
etc.

Please let me know whether you think this system is better or worse than the previous system.

Peer responses: Several of you expressed disappointment with some of the peer responses to your journal because you felt they were overly critical. Therefore, please remember (I will too), while you're reading and responding to journals, that these journals are an informal place to explore and clarify new concepts and to test out new ideas. If the writer gets mostly negative or critical feedback to such experimental entries, then they might be less likely to trust enough to be experimental the next time around. So in your responses, try to expand upon some of your positive comments (e.g., "I agree") to help them (and you!) further explore the concept. What about the person's idea did you agree with? Does this spark new ideas for you? The section of the Journal-Writing Guide handout on Peer responses may give you ideas about the kinds of entries that you can do in addition to critical entries. I hasten to add, though, that only glowing, non-critical responses are artificial and mislead the writer. Just use your judgment about balancing negative with positive responses.

Reading assignments: Several of you also expressed concern about the quantity of work required between Monday's and Wednesday's sections. To reduce this a bit, in the future I will *try* to give you all of the reading assignments for the next week on Wednesday, so that you can read them over the weekend and get ahead.

General journal assignment: After reading your evaluations and journal-writing journal entries, I want to make clear my purpose in assigning journals. I hope that this will allow you to modify the assignment as appropriate so that you are writing journal entries that help you and not journal entries that simply get you journal entries.

The reason that I have assigned journals is because I find that informal writing about new concepts is a good way of clarifying my understanding of those concepts, of figuring out what questions to ask if I don't understand, and of trying to apply those new concepts to new situations. Essentially, I hope that you will use journals to explore and play with new concepts. This might mean clarifying what you think you understand or what you know you don't understand. But if you are sure that you fully understand something, then it may not be important to write journal entry summarizing that concept.

You might instead want to write an entry about where this new concept fits in with other concepts that you've learned in the course (or elsewhere), or perhaps come up with a situation from your own experience to which you think this concept applies and explore that a bit to see whether and where the

concept does or does not apply. The Journal-Writing Guide handout may give useful ideas about productive ways of modifying journal entries.

Directed journal assignments: To follow up from the above general discussion. If a directed assignment that I suggest on the handout seems too obvious and straightforward to you, then please write your own assignment!! The directed journal assignments are really more suggestion than assignment; my attempt to give you some direction in your response. But if you want to go in another direction and see where that takes you, feel free to do so. The only thing that I do ask is that you continue to write extensively in your journal, whether in response to my assignments or assignments that you write for yourself.

The bottom line: modify the assignment so that it maximizes your benefit and minimizes writing just for the sake of completing an assignment.

If you have questions or comments about these issues, please either write about them in your journal or bring them up before or after class.