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## THE JOURNALING AND CREATIVITY CONNECTION: 9 REASONS TO START JOURNALING NOW

July 25th, 2016 by Lauren Kirshner [View all posts by Lauren Kirshner](#)



Illustration: Tia Wong

Recently I saw the handwriting of a friend I've known for many years. It was a bit surprising. Not because the handwriting was illegible or because they dotted their i's with endearing little fish heads, but because I'd only ever seen their writing on a screen, in cool, detached 12 point New Times Roman. Seeing their physical handwriting, the saucy curls on their *ts* and *ys*, the fingerprint smudges of ink, seemed so *intimate*, kind of like catching a rare glimpse into a usually hidden recess of their personality.

Journal writing is one of the most intimate forms of writing we can do. It invites us to be exploratory, confessional, messy, playful, awkward, and truthful. We do it by hand, we do it in private notebooks, we do it to spill secrets and wrestle with our weirdo thoughts.

Journal writing might seem kind of dinosaur-ish in our age of immediate, public writing on social media, but it is a good way to discover your voice and to keep limber as a writer.

I've always been fascinated by the journals of creative people because they are like backstage passes to the art. In an impressive [collection](#) assembled by Flavourwire, you can see the journals of some famous artists, writers, and entertainers. Marilyn Monroe's journal was a little black book filled with assertions: "I will be as sensitive as I am – without being ashamed of it." Frida Kahlo's journal's doubled as her sketchbook. "I don't paint dreams or nightmares," Kahlo wrote, "I paint my own reality."

When I first discovered I wanted to write, I was a shy teenager who wallpapered her bedroom with cut-outs from *Rolling Stone* instead of attending semi-formals. The idea that I could expose my thoughts and ideas – and have people care – seemed as likely as Billy Corgan begging me to record Siamese Dream II with him. But writing for myself, to myself, was doable. There was no risk in exposure. Journal writing became one of the few places where I felt in control. And because no one but me was reading what I wrote, I was free to splat down the entire squirmy, truthy mess of my inner life, no holds barred. This was practice in the one skill no writer can do without, which is, at all costs, avoiding bullshit.

Here are nine other reasons why starting a journal now might enhance your creativity:

1) *It quiets your inner censor.* Research has shown that journaling – the practice of writing without expectations – can help people override their inner censor, which in turn can help them become more creative. If you are perfectionistic – calling all queens of the backspace bar – one of the most helpful methods I know of to make your writing more spontaneous and enjoyable is ["free writing"](#) – a relative to journaling. Coined by Natalie Goldberg, author of *Writing Down the Bones*, in "free writing" you set an amount of time (ten minutes to start and later you can work up to more), pick a prompt (or whatever you're thinking that day) and write. You don't stop to re-read or edit what you've written; you don't lift your pen. I've found story ideas through free writing in my journal. You may too. Either way, you're still training yourself to embrace the inherent messiness of the creative process, without censoring your thoughts.

2) *It is good practice in trusting the authority of your own voice.* Related to the above, perfectionism can lead to the tyranny of wanting to always "write well" or, its relative, "sound cool/smart/interesting/fun" (known assassins of creativity). While it's excellent to have creative ambitions – and even to emulate writers you like, for practice – figuring out how to translate your ideas onto the page is a personal exploration every writer needs to go through that requires self-trust. Your "voice" is something that will develop on its own if you allow yourself to be messy, experimental and open to things not working – this is all a crucial part of the process. Writing "well" comes in editing, later. Because the journal *requires* messiness, it is a very good place to practice discovering and using your voice (and many of us have a *few* different writing voices – the journal is a great place to explore *all* of them).

3) *It can be a flashlight for your ideas.* Many writers have used the journal to map their own minds, to pluck the gems from the snarl of the imagination. “I write because I don’t know what I think until I read what I say,” writer Flannery O’Connor once said. Joan Didion expressed a related idea: “I don’t know what I think until I write it down.” The novelist Gustave Flaubert said, “The art of writing is the art of discovering what you believe.” As well as illuminating your ideas, the journal also becomes a pond of stocked material for future writing. The diarist Anaïs Nin recalled finding in her journal “countless images, portraits, descriptions, impressionistic sketches, symphonic experiments, from which I could dip at any time for material.” The journal is also a superb no-commitment place where you can flirt with ideas before committing to them.

4) *It will always be there for you.* Your journal will never reject you, take nine hours to text you back, or tell everyone about the time you accidentally peed in your own shoe. Journals are great for recording what hurts. Kafka put it like this: “One advantage in keeping a diary is that you become aware with reassuring clarity of the changes which you constantly suffer.” But the journal will also show you how you overcame so many trials. Reading your journal a few months or years after a big life event might remind you of how resilient you are. Ultimately, your journal can be an anchor and a confidante, a tool to help you build resilience. Creativity involves solitude, even loneliness, and putting art in the world carries the risk of rejection: resilience is a quality that every writer needs.

5) *It lets you nurture ideas that may not be ready for harvesting.* If you are on the shyer side, the act of hitting “post” on Facebook can activate an inner validation-seeking machine. Keeping a journal alongside social media allows you to curate your thoughts into two distinct categories – “stuff I want to share publically right now” and “stuff that’s just for me right now.” Some of your best ideas might not be ones you want to share just yet (or ever), but having a journal to record them in will preserve them so they can grow into fully formed ideas (poems, novels, journalism, plays) you may one day want to share with the world.

6) *It is a record of who you are, what you think, and who you want to become.* More than photographs, journals are the most faithful record of how we change over time. Keeping a journal is a document of how your personality unfolds, day-by-day, week-by-week. The poet [Souvankham Thammavongsa](#) credits her journal with allowing her to commit to becoming a poet: “I’ve kept a journal since I was twelve years old...with a journal, I’ve learned how to lock myself up in the quietness of my mind with my own voice and to listen to it.” Journals are also like a mirror into little moments of your life. [Katherine McLeod](#), who teaches English literature at Concordia, writes in her little red journal on trains, buses, and in cafes. She calls her notebook “a reminder in written fragments of who I want to be (or wanted to be) and who I am.” Journal writing helps us tap into our inner voice, trust it, and follow it. Said the writer Eudora Welty: “All serious daring comes from within.”

7) *It can build community for you.* Not all journal writing has to be private. Novelist [Zoe Whittall](#) told me: “When I was in my early to mid twenties I discovered online anonymous

diaries (Diaryland, then Livejournal) and it was really the first way that I interacted online in any real capacity. It was the first time I was able to talk about my anxiety disorder and find other people who could relate. It felt like having many caring and attentive penpals.” Today, there are many ways to publically journal, including blogging platforms like Tumblr and Instagram (#journaling and #journal). Journal writing you share can reach people who are part of your community and put you in touch with kindred souls.

8) *It can help you become comfortable with the process of the writing.* Writers have used their journals to become more comfortable with the writing process, away from a product-driven creative orientation. We live in an increasingly [accelerated culture](#), where our internal timers tick faster than ever, making delayed gratification our *bête noire*. As a result, process may take a backseat to product, which is a risky move when making art. Yet the journal - in how it revels in contemplation and play - is a rebuke to that trend, a space where you can slow down (even if you're writing fast) to capture fleeting, juicy ideas that might have otherwise evaporated into the hustle of everyday.

9) *It is a safe place to practice expressing your reality/truth.* The journal is perhaps the only writing form that discourages you from worrying about what other people will think. It is, in the first instance, by you and *for* you - and comes without any consequences to telling your version of reality, your truth. This freedom is what makes the journal the ideal place to practice self-exposure. To write fiction or poetry, you don't need to write about yourself, but you do need to embrace “truthiness” (not factuality - just the art of being real, true, present and honest). If you can learn how to be truthful in your journal, you are one step closer to bringing that integrity and beauty to the page. One of my favourite writers, [Grace Paley](#), once remarked that, “If you say what's on your mind in the language that comes from your parents and your streets and your friends, you'll probably say something beautiful.” When you write from a place of truth, which the journal can encourage, you are likely to write beautiful.



*A selection of the author's journals from a seven year period.*

If you want to journal, here's how you can get started (and keep going):

- 1) *Buy a notebook.* I've used lots of different types of notebooks through the years. Now I like plain dollar store 120 page notebooks. Family members who know you like to write might buy you fancy leather-bound journals embossed with pictures of unicorns jumping out of the sun, but for me, those unicorns are anxiety inducers. I like the no-pressure invitation to mediocrity that cheap notebooks provide. Use a pen that writes fast, is a colour you like, and is smooth. (But avoid pen selection purgatory!). If you journal online or on your computer, find a site to host you. With both paper and digital journaling, make sure you have in place privacy and security features that make you feel comfortable.
- 2) *Write fast and in the voice that comes naturally.* Don't think as you write – this is the place to just let it flow out.
- 3) *Put the date on every entry and consider setting a time limit.* When you're looking back at your journal years from now, it will be fun to see your development through the years. You may also want to write in your journal at the same every day, to establish a routine. [This](#) handy quick set of journaling tips from The Guardian recommends only writing for a set period of time (which can help take the pressure off).

4) If you're feeling stuck, like the thoughts in your brain are bubble tea tapioca balls jammed in a straw, read other women's diaries for inspiration. Some exceptionally brave, talented women wrote diaries that ended up becoming famous, but they had no idea that would happen at the time. For a long time, women's voices in literature were outcast; women wrote diaries for survival. *A Writer's Diary* by Virginia Woolf, *Runaway* by Evelyn Lau, *The Diary of Anne Frank*, *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl* by Harriet Jacobs, *The Diary of Frida Kahlo: An Intimate Self-Portrait*, *The Intimate Journal* by George Sand, and *The Journals of Sylvia Plath* are great places to start.

Like any other creative practice, writing a journal can seem arduous at first. But remember: there are no rules in journal writing. You don't have to write every day, or even every week, and you can stop at any time. But after a while, journaling might just become a key part of your creative process.

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