

Reflection and Journaling – a start-up guide

What is a journal?

A journal can provide the space to explore ourselves, to have conversation with ourselves as we grow to understand our motivations, desires and actions in more profound ways.

It can be: “...*a tool for self-discovery, an aid to concentration, a mirror for the soul, a place to generate and capture ideas, a safety valve for the emotions, a training ground for the writer, and a good friend and confidant.*”

A journal is not the same as a diary. Diaries serve to remind us of what happened when, or what remains to be done. Journals are about reflecting on how we felt about the things that have happened and what lessons have been learned.

Your thoughts may be no more than a few bullet points, or a poem, or some scripture, or art/doodles – it really is up to you. The important thing is that whatever you do, you are helped to reflect in such a way that relevant connections are made between your particular context and the new ideas you are encountering.

By keeping track of a situation or event you can collect thoughts, insights, feelings and much more about the context so that you have a rich source for later reflections. When you are in the midst of something, you often don't know what the most significant aspects of the experience will be. By keeping track of things in your journal you can return to them later when you have more space and opportunity to see what the most important aspects are, or where you most might need to learn something.

NOTE – if you are keeping a written journal then your journal is **not** the notebook in which you do notetaking while you are reading study materials. Your journal should be a separate book.

What is its value?

Keeping a journal can be a useful discipline because it encourages you to notice with care what is going on around you, how others respond to you, how you feel in different settings and how you see God at work.

The act of writing slows you down and often gives you the opportunity to notice those things that most challenge you.

A journal will work best when you are honest with yourself. Most of what you write in your journal will not be seen by anyone else, but unlike a personal diary you may want to refer to it later when in conversation with others i.e. to talk about your life, pray together or when seeking wisdom about a decision you need to make.

What to include

Good questions to consider when filling in your journal are ...

- How did I feel about some event/news/activity/conversation?
- Why did I feel as I did?
- What else was going on for me at the time?
- How did my feelings impact my actions or response?
- Was my response all that I would wish for myself?
- What might God be saying to me through this experience?

Clearly this list is not exhaustive, but hopefully it gives you some ideas.

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Ways to journal

A written journal is one way of journaling and doing this with a pen rather than typing is perhaps more helpful as it slows the process down and encourages deeper reflection.

There are of course other ways of journaling too. You might use photographs or other images, create a blog or vlog, write poetry or draw pictures – or use a combination of methods.

Here's a list of some ways you might create your journal:

- Text account – either electronic or on paper - like a diary - in a notebook or via a text file on your laptop or tablet.
- Audio presentation – voice account/music/interview/other sound combination i.e., you might just speak your thoughts out loud using the voice memo feature on a smartphone, for example, or play record a piece of music if that is how you want to express your reflection.
- Blog – can be created using a tool like Blogger or WordPress - make sure to decide if you want it to be private or public and adjust your settings accordingly.
- Photographic presentation of one or more photos/slides, maybe a photo slider presentation online (like a projector slideshow offline) on a blog or webpage.
- Video presentation – either directly recorded on a mobile phone or via a YouTube channel (or other web presence) you might have or create. YouTube can also be used to link up Vlog posting(s).
- Artwork of any kind (e.g., pottery; painting; photo/video montage; patchwork; screen print or any kind of physical creation. You might then photo/video/blog/vlog the result via a webpage or blog etc.).
- In all cases you can always add notes to explain or clarify what you are presenting.

Writing reflectively

Reflecting in a journal, whether this is something you write or create in another way, is a way of expressing your reflective thinking. Rather than describing something that has happened, or telling the story of an experience, a reflective account invites you to express your thoughts and feelings about that experience. You might ask questions about that experience and by doing this take things from it which you can learn from for the future. In theological reflection, you would ask 'where is God in all this?'

Here's a short video explaining how to write reflectively - what to write about, what to avoid writing about and the benefits of reflective writing.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QoI67VeE3ds>

(link will open in a new window if you are reading this online)

How to get started

A journal can take any form. A written journal may seem a bit daunting at first, however many people find that a written journal becomes most useful for ongoing reflection, and if

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it is kept regularly rather than sporadically, whether that's for a short period or over a lifetime.

If you choose a written journal then you can incorporate as many different styles of writing as you wish. Don't worry about grammar or even punctuation; simply pour onto paper whatever comes. If the idea of writing seems difficult then practice a little first.

Here are some exercises you might like to try:

Exercise 1

Write for 6 minutes without stopping on a key experience, important encounter or significant conversation.

Try one of these as a heading:

- a piece of work I would love to initiate/complete;
- a relationship I find difficult;
- an aspect of my life that makes me feel really alive;
- the last straw.

After 6 minutes explore what you've written and what questions it asks of you and what insights it reveals into how you feel and why you act as you do. You are likely to be surprised at how much this does reveal about yourself.

Exercise 2

Let your journaling expand to include any form of writing you find helpful and can enjoy: stories; poems; musings or reflections upon an event; dialogues with the self; fictional dialogues or monologues with others; analysis of your own motives and actions; philosophising; assessment of your worship leading or preaching; descriptions of situations, places, and people; fantasy; letters to yourself and others.

Some good questions to prompt your writing are...

- What was done on any particular occasion?
- What was thought about it?
- What was felt about it?

You may well find that at first your journal tends to be mainly descriptive. But, over time and as you settle into your own style, it should gain depth and become more self-aware and reflective.

Exercise 3

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If your journal is in paper form (although using a mobile phone or laptop computer are suitable modes for reflection too) expand your journal to include 'scraps' of inspirational or significant words from newspapers or magazines. Include illustrations or textile pieces that are relevant to the situation or place you are recording. Think about why these are meaningful for you. Some people find it important and helpful to choose a really good quality book to write in for their journal whilst others are happy to use any sort of book they can find.

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Reflecting with your journal

Whatever format you use it is a very good idea to allow room to go back over journal entries and add to them. It is when you do this later re-reading that you can become your own “critical friend” adding comments about what you are reading and how you feel as you read what you wrote.

This may well be the point at which you begin to add biblical insights to your text or relate what you’ve written to hymns or other aspects of our tradition. You are starting to work with your text reflectively. This will yield all sorts of invaluable material to draw on as you go onwards with your personal and faith development.

The Examen

The Examen of Ignatian Spirituality can provide a good framework for reflection.

See <https://www.ignatianspirituality.com/ignatian-prayer/the-examen> (link will open in a new window if you are viewing this online)

A version of the Examen for you might look like this –

- ‘Look Back’: Look back over the week with God in mind. Where have I seen God at work?
- ‘Look through’: Make connections with what has happened. What is ‘of God’? Do patterns emerge?
- ‘Look forward’: What ideas or challenges come out of my reflection? What do I need to work on? Is there anything I should do differently?
- ‘Look around’: What are the implications for those around me – my family, friends, or the wider community? How can I learn from them?

(adapted from Bryn Hughes – Discipling, Coaching and Mentoring, Kingsway 2003, p. 153ff)

Further reading

Judith Thompson, *SCM Study guide to Theological Reflection*, SCM Press, 2010

Elaine Graham, Heather Walton and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection Methods (2nd Edition)*; SCM Press 2019

Patricia O’Connor Killen and John DeBeer, *The Art of Theological Reflection*, Crossroads, 1994

Sally Nash and Paul Nash, *Tools for Reflective Ministry*, SPCK 2009

Suzanne Quinney and Tim Slack, *Reflections – Realising the power of Appreciative Inquiry: an Appreciative Journal and practical resource book*, Wordscape 2017