



# Journaling Essentials

*Everything You Need to Know  
to Start and Keep a Journal*

Amber Lea Starfire



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to Start and Keep a Journal*

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Cover Photograph by Amber Lea Starfire

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## Seven Wonderful Benefits of Journaling

If you're reading this, you are probably attracted to the idea of writing on a regular basis. Perhaps you've started a journal many times and have been unable to keep it going. To help you start and maintain your journal, it is helpful to understand some of its many benefits.

### I

#### Self-Care

Many would-be journal writers worry about finding the time to journal. "I already have too much to do," they say. If, like them, you are worried about the ability to commit to writing, ask yourself the following questions: Would you stop bathing, brushing your teeth, or washing your hair because it takes up too much time? Would you stop going to the doctor or dentist because of time constraints? I'm betting that you wouldn't, because you probably consider all of these things essential to taking care of yourself.

Studies have proven journal writing to be so beneficial for emotional and physical health that I think it's nearly as important a form of self-care as brushing your teeth. It's true, it won't hurt you to skip brushing now and then, but you probably wouldn't want to stop doing it altogether. The same is true of journaling.

And since journal writing can be done in only ten minutes a day, maybe the question to ask yourself is, "How can I *not* find the time to journal?" As Phyllis Theroux so aptly states in her book, *The Journal Keeper*, "If you need to do it, you'll make the time."



**Exercise:**

Make a list of all the ways you take care of yourself. Include ordinary, daily activities as well as those that feel special. Next to each item write how long it takes (approximately). Now, make a list of all the ways you could make (or find) ten minutes each day.

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

## Catharsis & Emotional Healing

Catharsis means to cleanse or clear emotions — releasing pent-up emotional energy by allowing yourself to experience and express those emotions.

Unhealed emotional wounds can keep you from accomplishing what you want to do or from being the sort of person you'd really like to be. When you write for yourself — and only yourself — in a journal, you can express feelings and thoughts that you might not dare tell anyone. In the process, you unburden yourself of emotions that might otherwise bog you down.

Writing is a great way to keep the flow of emotions moving in a healthy way. For example, I once wrote a three-page angry diatribe to my ex-husband telling him everything I hated about him. I really told him off! I was able to say everything I needed and wanted to say, because I knew it would stay in my journal. I didn't have to censor myself in any way. Afterwards, I felt calm, relieved, and able to think about him with a more balanced perspective.

Writing about past events works the same way. The process of exploring emotions associated with our past can be like cleansing and disinfecting a wound that refuses to heal. Yes, it can be a little painful, but afterwards the wound is clean and has a better chance of healing properly; the clogged emotional state that kept the wound active has been cleared.

### ***Exercise:***

Write about a problem or annoyance in your life right now, including how you feel about that problem. Express your anger, fear, and any other emotions as fully as possible. Then, write about how it would feel if that problem were to just go away. Poof!

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This image shows a full page of blank, lined paper. It features approximately 20 evenly spaced horizontal black lines running across the width of the page, providing a guide for handwriting or typing. The background is a solid off-white color.



## Clarity

There is almost nothing more difficult than feeling uncertain or out of control. Writing, however, is something you *can* control, an action you can take each day, no matter what else is happening in your life.

Writing through times of uncertainty and change clarifies perspective and strengthens decision-making skills. When you aren't sure what direction to take or have difficulty choosing between two or more options, writing can help you clarify and organize your thinking. By exploring the feelings surrounding each option, you gain self-knowledge, which helps you make difficult decisions and move forward.

### ***Exercise:***

Are you facing changes in your life or have a choice to make? Write down all the possible options, then write how you feel about each one. Notice if this process of writing about your choices helps bring clarity to what you want.

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### **Making Meaning of the Meaningless: Personal Growth**

I believe that all of life's events are meaningful, even when they seem random and nonsensical. And each of us has something different to learn or take away from everything that happens in our lives. Creative acts such as writing and art help us uncover the personal value of our experiences.

Making sense of things can be difficult to do while we are in the middle of a painful experience. But—and this is key—if we have, through writing and art, recorded our inner perceptions and our honest truths while moving through these events, we will not only emerge more intact and healthy, we will have treasure chests full of valuable insights and gifts that we can share with others in our lives.

When I was in my late twenties, my small family — my husband, my two small children, and myself — sold our home and moved to Europe. We ended up losing everything — our friends, the money from our home, and our sense of unity. We never recovered and my family eventually broke apart under the stress. At the time, I could not understand what was happening, nor why it was happening. I fell into a dark depression that lasted two years. During this period, I continued to write.

Later, I was able to go back to those journals and see the threads of my life woven into the fabric of everything that happened. Through the writing and, later, reading what I had written, I became empowered to understand what I had gained through my experiences: increased tolerance, compassion for others, an open mind to others' opinions and viewpoints, and a larger understanding of life in general. Ultimately, I grew into an expanded sense of my own spirituality and purpose in life.

What was catastrophe became a meaningful gift. With or without writing, we grow from our life experiences. With writing, we increase our ability to access



our own inner wisdom and strength. We give ourselves the gift of understanding.

**Exercise:**

Think about a difficult time in your past. What coping mechanisms did you use to make it through that time? What did you learn about yourself and how did you grow as a person in response to that challenge?

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## Holding Onto Memories

Recording the events of your life on paper is like taking snapshots and storing them in a photo album. Later, you can look at your album and enjoy the memories the photographs bring back to you.

If the events of your life seem too ordinary to write about, I can assure you from personal experience that if you consistently record your life in your journal, the circumstances around events, and how you feel *while they are happening*, you'll be glad you did. These seemingly unimportant or difficult parts of your life become the stories you'll return to for comfort and inspiration. The stories that you'll tell to your children and grandchildren. The stories of universal importance that speak of what it is to be human, to love, to surmount and survive obstacles.

### **Exercise:**

Review your day today (or yesterday). Write about the first ordinary moment that pops into your mind.

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### Sharing Memories: Writing for Others

While journal writing is essentially a personal and private activity designed to help you process emotions and thoughts and make meaning of the events in your life, as stated in “Holding Onto Memories,” it is also a record of your life. Your journals can become the source and basis for stories that you write for others — a way of creating and storing treasures of personal and family history.

Not every journal writer aspires to write professionally or be published. However, if you do want to improve your writing and strengthen your writing voice, journaling is a great method with which to do it. You can use writing prompts that serve dual purposes: distill thinking and feeling on particular subjects while providing a forum for practice. In the process you will sharpen your perceptions, bring yourself more firmly into the present moment, and improve your powers of description all in one fell swoop.

***Exercise:***

Select something near you that feels significant in some way. Describe it in detail. Include all the physical senses — sight, hearing, taste, smell, and touch — as well as any emotional responses to that item.

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## Enhanced Creativity

Inside each of us is a deep well of creative energy. The act of writing pumps this creativity up from its depths to the surface. We can use writing prompts to give our imagination a workout, for fun, or simply as exercises to warm up to our intended writing tasks. Once ideas begin to flow, they will flow in any direction we guide them. All we have to do is sculpt the paths along which they run. And the more we practice writing, the better at it we become.

### ***Exercise:***

Creativity is closely related to play. For this exercise watch a child or children at play (if you need to, go to a park with a playground or visit your local kindergarten), listen to the children talk to each other and themselves while they create imaginary scenarios. Write about the nature of play and how you might apply it to your own life and writing.

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## Getting Started

Hopefully, you've read about the benefits of journaling and completed the exercises on the previous pages. If so, you have in fact already started journal writing. Congratulations! Here are the next steps:

- Go to the store and select a plain notebook. A spiral bound notebook, with or without lines works best. Leather-bound or colorful journals filled with parchment paper are beautiful and feel good to hold, but they often have the effect of making us think that what we write in them must be equally beautiful. When you're starting out, that can be intimidating. So find a notebook that feels ordinary. Something in which you can write whatever you want and not worry about whether it's "good" writing or not.
- Choose a favorite pen or pencil. One that feels good in your hand and glides across the paper. One that will facilitate getting your thoughts from your mind to the page.

### OR

- If you prefer to write at the computer because you type quickly and you like the feel of the keyboard under your fingers, then by all means, use the computer for your journal writing. (I prefer writing at the computer myself, but also like to keep a small notebook handy, for the times I am away from my computer and have the urge to write).
- If you're just starting out, use your favorite word processing program, such as Microsoft Word, and create one document for each month (you can title it something like "March 2010").

- I recommend starting with your word processor so that you feel comfortable writing and don't get bogged down with learning a new program. When you're ready (after you've journaled regularly for a month or two), I recommend journaling software, such as [MacJournal](#) for the Macintosh or [WinJournal](#) for a Windows PC, both from Mariner software. (I do not receive any money for this recommendation.) There are many other journaling software programs available, and you may want to do a little research before making a commitment.

## **The Rules of Journal Writing**

1. *There are no rules.* Only guidelines. Not even that. Everything that follows is a suggestion, born of experience. But feel free to adopt anything that works for you and discard anything that doesn't.
2. It does not matter what you use to write with. Let me say this again: it does not matter what tool you use when you write, as long as it's something semi-permanent. You can use your finger and sand, if you wish, and you'll experience some of the benefits of writing, like catharsis. But you'll miss out on some of the other benefits if you can't store and read what you wrote later on, so I recommend a more or less permanent way of recording your thoughts. After that, the medium doesn't really matter. You can use paper or a computer. You can write with pen, pencil, crayons, paints, or quill and ink. You can use lined paper, plain paper, fancy journals, inexpensive notebooks, a word processing program, a special journaling program, whatever. The key is to find ways that are comfortable and fun. You can also illustrate your writing with pictures, drawings, paintings and photographs. In fact, these visual aids might be invaluable later on, if you decide to write your memoirs.

3. Write in a comfortable space where you will not be interrupted — a time and place that is just for you. And again, it doesn't matter if that space is in a busy, noisy coffeehouse (white noise in the background), at the park, or at home in your meditation room.
4. Remember that *everything* that flows from your pen or computer keyboard is good and right. There is no right or wrong, no immature or mature, no poor writing or excellent writing. It all just is. Do not judge anything you write. Think: The Zen of Journaling.
5. Write about a topic until you have no more to write, until your brain just stops dead in its tracks, and you feel the emotion has drained through your fingers onto the paper. Then go do something else for a while.

## Staying Started

### Schedule a Time Just for YOU

The single-most important thing to *successfully* making journal writing a habitual part of your life is to schedule it as a regular daily activity.

For example, my habit is to wake up, throw on my sweats, grab a cup of coffee, and write. Depending on my schedule that day, I might write in my journal for ten minutes, or I might write for thirty. It doesn't matter how long I write — only that I write.

You may prefer to schedule time in the afternoon, while the children are napping or at school. Or you may prefer to write in the evening, when you can take time to reflect on your day. Whatever time you decide, schedule ten minutes for writing, then *stick to your schedule for six weeks*. Why six weeks? Because that's how long it takes to make something a real habit. And once it's a habit, your day won't feel complete unless you journal.

Remember, your journal writing time is precious time just for you. A time to take care of yourself, to listen to yourself, and to integrate what you are learning.

#### **Exercise:**

Write down the time you will write in your journal every day.

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Now, put it on your calendar. If you use an electronic calendar on your phone or PDA, set an alarm to remind you that it's time to write.

## Writing Prompts and Inspirational Quotes

When you have a lot going on in your life, you may find that your thoughts and feelings pour through you onto the paper (or the computer screen). Other times, you'll sit down, look at the blank page in front of you and wonder what to write about. That's when it's time to use journal writing prompts, tips, and inspirational quotes to get you started, like the exercises you did in the "Benefits of Journaling" section of this e-book.

You may sometimes veer off to another topic as you write. That's fine. The point is to find a prompt that gets you started or helps you to deepen your reflection about an event or feeling in your life.

### Twenty Random and Fun Writing Prompts

1. Write about how your childhood made you the person you are now.
2. Describe your favorite toy as a child. Why did you like it best? What is your favorite "toy" now, and why do you like it?
3. Write a list of the qualities you dislike most about yourself (laziness, selfishness, childishness, etc.) and why you think these qualities are negative. Now, for each quality you dislike, write an opposite quality that you like about yourself. How does that likeable quality contribute to your life and how does having the negative quality support its positive opposite?
4. Think about today or yesterday and write a scene from your day. Include descriptions of the place, the time of day, and the people who were there. Use dialog if possible. If you were the only one there, try inner dialog. Don't worry about the "quality" of the writing. Who cares? Just have fun!
5. Complete the following sentence: If I could do one thing over in my life, I would ...
6. Write a letter to someone you love (alive or dead), describing all the qualities that make/made them important to you.

7. Write about your childhood experiences with holidays. How do you remember family events? Write about one that stands out most in your memory.
8. What does it mean to love yourself? What does it mean to accept yourself as you are? Are these the same or different? How?
9. Write a story about your life that ends, "I could go on and on."
10. Write about a time you had a really bad haircut. What happened? What did you do about it?
11. Make a list of things you are not willing to change. Why not? What could happen if they did?
12. Write a letter to yourself about something you wish that you were doing that you're not.
13. Write a letter to yourself six months from now. Write encouragement and advice. Seal the letter, date it, and put a note on your calendar to read it six months from today.
14. Write a few paragraphs about something you accomplished that made you feel good about yourself.
15. If you could only do one thing each day, what would it be?
16. What is your relationship with time? Do you waste it? Wish it away? Wish there were more of it? Want it to be different? Write about it.
17. Write about something you've never talked about honestly with anyone.
18. Think about a place or thing in your life that is "old" or commonplace. Been there done that. What might you be taking for granted? What are you grateful for about this "old" place or thing?
19. How do you define success in your personal life? Have you reached that point or are you still striving for it?
20. Describe where you are right now. Describe the place, the quality of light, the smells and sounds and sights. Describe how you are physically (sitting, standing) and the feelings you have as you write.

## Ten Inspirational Quotes

You can take many approaches to using quotes as inspiration for journal writing. I suggest selecting a quote and asking yourself what that quote means to you and if you agree with it. Does it hold true for you? Then write about how it holds true (or not) in your life. If you can, write about times in your life when you wished you had listened to the message of that quote, but didn't. Or write about a time in the future and how that quote might affect your perceptions or actions.

The idea is to think around a quote from as many different perspectives as possible, past, present, and future. And then just write.

1. "To dare is to lose one's footing momentarily. Not to dare is to lose oneself." Søren Kierkegaard
2. "The main thing we learn when we struggle to learn is that learning is a struggle." Frank Smith, *The Book of Learning and Forgetting*
3. "The Four Levels of Comedy: make your friends laugh, make strangers laugh, get paid to make strangers laugh, and make people talk like you because it's so much fun." Jerry Seinfeld
4. Dream as if you'll live forever, live as if you'll die today." James Dean
5. "Success is not final, failure is not fatal: it is the courage to continue that counts." Winston Churchill
6. Speaking of journals: "Virginia called them 'holdalls' to reflect the light of our lives. The dark, I fear, creeps in rather more, in my case." Edna O'Brien
7. "Most folks are about as happy as they make their minds up to be." Abraham Lincoln
8. "You will find as you look back upon your life that the moments when you have really lived are the moments when you have done things in the spirit of love." Henry Drummond

9. "I would much rather have regrets about not doing what people said, than regretting not doing what my heart led me to and wondering what life had been like if I'd just been myself." Brittany Renée
10. And Finally: "Motivation is what gets you started. Habit is what keeps you going." Jim Rohn

## **The Journal Writing Community**

Journal writing is a private affair, but the experiences, tips, and insights we experience are better when shared. When we get stuck or feel that our writing is "useless" or "too ordinary" or "too dark," our community of writers gives us the encouragement we need to keep going. So it's a good idea to become part of a local or online journal writing community. Here are a number of journaling-related web sites to get you started.

- <http://www.writingthroughlife.com> — The author's website, which offers inspiration for daily writing, a weekly journal writing e-zine called "Journaling Through Life," online classes, e-books, and more.
- Blogs about journaling:
  - <http://www.womensmemoirs.com> — all about memoir and improving your writing skills. Also hosts the author's weekly guest blogs about journaling.  
[The Warm Milk Journal](#)
  - <http://journalingarts.wordpress.com/>
  - <http://blog.createwritenow.com/>
- [International Association of Journal Writers](#) – Membership site offering articles, classes, and journaling e-zine.
- Websites about writing memoir and life story
  - <http://www.womensmemoirs.com> (see above for description)
  - [National Association of Memoir Writers](#) - Membership site.



## About the Author

Amber Lea Starfire, author of *XPress It: A Step-by-Step Guide to QuarkXpress*, numerous nonfiction articles and e-books, earned a B.S. in Organizational Behavior at the University of San Francisco and an M.S. in Education at Stanford University.

A longtime journal keeper, Amber launched [Writing Through Life](#) in 2010 to inspire and empower others to journal and write daily, make meaning of life, and tell their stories. A freelance writer, editor, and photographer, she is also Editor and Publisher of [The Writer's Eye Magazine](#), an online magazine devoted to the integration of the visual and written arts.

Amber has taught classes for nearly twenty years, following the subjects of her interest, including desktop publishing, graphic design, computer applications, ballroom dancing, and most recently, writing, and journaling.

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