



JOURNAL WRITING: IMPLEMENTING AN INTENTIONAL PRACTICE

Educator Tool

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INTRODUCTION

Like a new notebook, journal writing is full of possibilities: it's an opportunity for students to brainstorm ideas for future writing and to imagine worlds that don't exist yet. Journaling also provides students with a dedicated time to reflect on their experiences and to process the world around them. While academic writing is defined by rules and procedures, journals are limitless. Students are not bound by genre conventions, or even full sentences. They have the freedom to use illustrations, lists, and sentence fragments to communicate their ideas. It is a space all their own.

The practice of journaling can benefit students' personal and academic well-being in so many ways: it can support students' mental health by providing a personal space to reflect and process emotions, it can promote critical thinking and the expression of ideas, and it can encourage students to think creatively. At 826, journaling looks different across our chapters and programs; it's a very flexible practice that can be adapted to the needs of students. We encourage you to use this tool as a springboard into journal writing.

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...I do know that I'm a powerful pre-teen
With a world wide changing voice

CA, GRADE 7, 826CHI

HOW TO USE THIS EDUCATOR TOOL

This Educator Tool is divided into four sections:

- Prompts for Generating Ideas
- Prompts for Self-Reflection
- Prompts for Fun
- Resources for Long-Term Journaling

In the first three sections, you will find a variety of journal prompts ready for you to copy and paste onto slides or write on the board for your students. Each prompt is drawn from an 826 Digital resource. We've included links to the full resources so you can use them if you choose. In the final section, you will find standalone resources to complete with your students, once they have developed a love for journal writing. Each prompt is drawn from an 826 Digital resource. We've included links to the full resources so you can use them if you choose.

Resource Types:

	Sparks	Lessons	Projects	Videos
Description	Quick, adaptable writing prompts and activities. They help hone a specific skill or inspire big ideas.	Engage students deeply in the writing process, with a focus on writing skill development and drafting. They're built around a writing genre, topic, and writing standard(s)	Multisession units on a topic or theme. They help teach process and revision while students produce a polished piece.	Feature critically acclaimed authors and educators providing their own twist on Sparks and other writing activities.
Average recommended time	30 minutes	2 hours or 2 sessions	3 or more sessions	30 minutes - 1 hour or 1 session

HOW TO BEGIN

As with any practice, it is never too late to incorporate journaling into your daily routine.

If you did not introduce journaling at the start of the year, that's okay. We encourage you to jump into journaling at any point in the year! You can also change the way you incorporate journal writing throughout the year. As with any classroom routine, it is important to check in from time to time to reflect on how it is going. Allow students time to reflect on their own practice and set goals for themselves. We encourage you to journal alongside your students, both to model the practice and to carve out time for you to build your writing as well.

We also encourage you to ask yourself why you want to incorporate a journaling practice into your routine—is it to build students' critical-thinking and problem-solving skills, to encourage their creativity, to support their mental health, or a combination of all three? Whatever your “why,” we suggest you have a conversation with your students about it, because it will encourage them to think about what they'd like to get out of the practice, too. We encourage you to take notes about your students' goals so you can shape the journaling routine accordingly.

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If writing was a medicine, there [would] be universal healings.

JENNIFER M., 826LA

HOW TO BEGIN: JOURNALING BASICS

Before your students set pencil to paper, you need to decide a few basics:

The Audience

Who are your students writing for—are their journals to be shared with each other, with you, or kept private for only themselves? Will there be a mix? Whatever you decide, make sure to communicate the intended audience with students before they begin writing that day's entry. Students may feel more comfortable to write freely if they know it won't be shared with others; however, make sure that students understand that you will need to share their journal with a school counselor if you read something that indicates you or another student are not safe.

The How

Students will need support and structure to get started in their journal writing practice, but once a habit is created, they may need less guidance. Decide whether students will respond to prompts or write entries of their choice. Allow students agency over their work, and encourage them to explore their interests, ideas, and personal experiences through journaling. Some prompts may not spark every student, so if you are providing prompts, also provide choice. For example, you might give students the option to return to a previous day's work. Maybe you have a collection of prompts that are always available in addition to new ones throughout the week.

HOW TO BEGIN: JOURNALING BASICS

The Experience

Journaling can be a very personal activity, so you may want to consider how to support the experience with a comfortable and quiet environment. Lower the lights, play soft music, and encourage students to sit on the floor, if that's more comfortable for them. We recommend your students capture their writing in a notebook they can come back to as they look for ideas for future writing pieces. You can encourage students to let their personalities shine through by regularly making space for them to decorate their journal with photographs, word art, drawings, or inspirational pictures cut from magazines.

The Routine

When will students journal and for how long? Is journal writing a daily expectation at a consistent time in your schedule, something that your students can spend time doing at a time of their choosing, a combination of the two, or something else? We recommend choosing one day a week to replace your opening activity with a ten-minute journaling exercise. As students become more accustomed to the practice, you can decide whether you'd like to increase the frequency!

PROMPTS TO GENERATE IDEAS

At 826, we like to encourage our students to look for inspiration in many ways—drawing on their own experiences, the world around them, and the writing of others—to generate ideas for the piece they are ready to start now or to tuck away for future writing.

Prompt 1: Find a book and skim through it, looking for words that intrigue you. Make a list of these words (don't forget the title of the book!). If there's time, start writing a poem with at least three of your words.

[Book Scavenger Hunt with Amanda Gorman.](#) (VIDEO, GRADES 3-12)

Amanda Gorman, Inaugural U.S. Youth Poet Laureate, shares her favorite way to inspire a new poem or get past writer's block.

Prompt 2: Look around the room and find an object. Describe the object in the greatest detail. How many details about the object can you write down?

[Odes to Ordinary Objects.](#) (LESSON, GRADES 3-6)

Students find gratitude all around as they thank ordinary objects in their lives in the form of an ode.

Prompt 3: Make a list of titles for future pieces of writing. Put stars next to the ones you'd like to actually create.

[Write Here, Write Now.](#) (SPARK, GRADES 6-12)

These ten prompts ask students to browse the 826 Digital Student Writing Gallery for writing inspiration.

PROMPTS TO GENERATE IDEAS

Prompt 4: An elixir is a magical or medicinal potion. Think of a problem (big or small) that you'd like to solve, and then write a recipe for the elixir that solves your problem.

Miracle Elixir. (LESSON, GRADES 4-6)

Students play the role of benevolent inventors. They identify and think critically about real-world problems and create an ingredients list and usage instructions for an elixir that fixes the problem.

Prompt 5: Imagine you're a character in the future. What does the future look like? There could be robots, flying cars, cities in the skies, hoverboards, new hairdos and fashions—anything's possible!

Writing to Discover. (LESSON, GRADES 6-8)

Discover what's possible through writing. In this lesson, students write a thrilling new story about their future self inspired by their curiosity and imagination.

Prompt 6: Make a list of opening lines to a story or a personal narrative. Draw a star next to the ones you like the best.

One Good Line Deserves Another. (LESSON, GRADES 6-8)

Students find gratitude all around as they thank ordinary objects in their lives in the form of an ode.

Prompt 7: Draw a map of an imaginary place. If there's time, plot out the important locations of this place.

Map Your Streets & Tell Us Its Stories. (LESSON, GRADES 8-12)

Students tell stories about their neighborhoods and create maps that document change. The end result is a better understanding of a map's ability to demonstrate the history behind fixed points.

PROMPTS FOR SELF-REFLECTION

A classic use of journaling time is to make space for processing emotions and events. Before you begin one of these journaling sessions, make sure students know whether you'll be reading their entries.

Prompt 1: Draw a big heart in the middle of your page. Inside the heart, write the names of the things you really care about right now (people, animals, events). Then, if you have time, choose one of those things and write about why it's in your heart.

Sensory Heart Mapping. (SPARK, GRADES 1-5)

Students identify their favorite sensory memories and transfer them to a visual heart map.

Prompt 2: Answer the question, "How do you feel today?" Then, draw a picture of what your feelings look like.

Fill My Shoes. (VIDEO, GRADES 3-5)

Children's book author and 826michigan staffer Kinyel Friday shares a social and emotional learning prompt that uses personification to bring emotions to life.

Prompt 3: Write about an object that's important to you—anything from a necklace to your cell phone. What does that object say about you?

Artifacts Detective. (LESSON, GRADES 6-8)

Working as budding archaeologists, students use artifacts as inspiration for several short writing pieces.

Prompt 4: Think of someone who helped you grow or change in some way—it can be someone still in your life or someone you've parted ways with. Write a letter to that person, sharing the impact they've had on your life.

Letters, Undelivered. (SPARK, GRADES 6-12)

This activity prompts students to write words unspoken, in letters undelivered.

PROMPTS FOR SELF-REFLECTION

Prompt 5: Think of a moment when you were allowed to be unabashed, to be unapologetically yourself. Give thanks to everyone that made this moment possible.

Cataloging Gratitude. (LESSON, GRADES 9-12)

What happens when we start from a place of gratitude? In this lesson, students will use Ross Gay's "Catalog of Unabashed Gratitude" as a catalyst for a daily gratitude journal.

Prompt 6: Make a list of words or phrases that describe you. Write about how our classroom community can create a space where everyone feels seen and respected.

Identity Statements. (SPARK, GRADES 9-12)

Students create an identity chart and write about parts of their identity most salient to them.

Prompt 7: Read this quote from Harry S. Truman: "...In periods where there is no leadership, society stands still. Progress occurs when courageous, skillful leaders seize the opportunity to change things for the better." Write about the qualities you think make a leader effective.

Philosophical Journal Prompts. (SPARK, GRADES 11-12)

Students learn how to develop a consistent writing practice and produce a series of journal entries exploring philosophical and abstract concepts. For additional prompts, check out the [Slide Deck](#) from the Spark.

PROMPTS FOR FUN

Even though journaling offers a lot of very serious benefits for students, at its core, journaling is just writing. Our hope is that students find joy and silliness in these prompts and have a little fun along the way!

Prompt 1: Imagine you see a door, and the future sits on the other side. Write about the sensory details you can see, hear, feel, touch, and taste—what details would best represent the future you think is on the other side?

Doors to the Future. (LESSON, GRADES 3-5)

Imagination opens doors to new possibilities. This lesson allows students to exercise their imaginations by describing an imaginary door to the future and picturing what is beyond it.

Prompt 2: Make a list of things you think are cheesy, cringe, or outdated—try to be as specific as you can. (Example: Instead of writing “music,” think of a specific song or genre and write about why you think it’s cheesy.)

Cheesy Pop Song Poetry. (SPARK, GRADES 6-8)

A fun freewriting task that challenges students to take cheesy pop lyrics and make them into their own poems.

Prompt 3: Create an imaginary friend and write about an adventure the two of you would go on.

Big Book of IFs. (LESSON, GRADES K-8)

Imaginary friends come in all shapes and sizes! In this lesson, students create their own imaginary friend to take with them on their next adventure.

PROMPTS FOR FUN

Prompt 4: Write a silly scene inspired by the last thing that made you laugh.

[Comedy Writing Inspired by Monty Python.](#) (LESSON, GRADES 4-10)

In this Lesson, students learn how to write comedy sketches inspired by “Monty Python’s Flying Circus.”

Prompt 5: If you could trade lives with a superhero, a wizard, or a vampire, which would you choose? What’s the first thing you would do after your switch?

[Trading Lives: Be a Superhero for a Day](#) (LESSON, GRADES 5-6)

In this lesson, students imagine trading lives with a fictional character for a day and write about the fantastic possibilities that would ensue.

Prompt 6: Create your own word ladder: Start with a simple word, like cat or dog, and then change or add one letter so that it becomes a new word. Keep changing or adding one letter at a time until you can’t modify the word any more.

[Playing with Words with Aracelis Girmay.](#) (SPARK, GRADES 7-12)

What lives inside a word? Find out how to trace connections between two dissimilar words with this playful Spark from award-winning poet Aracelis Girmay.

Prompt 7: Write your favorite word at the top of the paper. Then, create an illustration that conveys how the word makes you feel or how you define the word. If there’s time, write about why you like the word.

[Illustrated Words.](#) (SPARK, GRADES 6-8)

In this activity, students illustrate a favorite word and explore what makes words meaningful through illustration, research, and discussion.

LONG-TERM JOURNALING RESOURCES

When your students get to a point where they are excited about journaling, we suggest you check out the standalone writing resources below. These resources help students level up their journaling practice by encouraging them to journal every day and for longer periods of time.

The Writer's Notebook. (SPARK, GRADES 3-5)

Students learn the power of daily, informal writing practice and produce a series of journal entries on a range of topics.

Battling the Page with Johan Bergenas. (VIDEO, GRADES 6-12)

This lesson helps students build a consistent practice by setting writing goals and using a writing tracker.

Writing & Mental Health with Arielle Johnson (AJ). (VIDEO, GRADES 6-12)

In this lesson, students learn a strategy for writing down their thoughts and feelings to understand them more clearly.

I Remember . . . with Natalie Moore. (VIDEO, GRADES 11-12)

In this lesson, students use journal entries as inspiration for a dynamic narrative poem.



I am the beginning of many ideas.

MAX S., AGE 11, 826 BOSTON