

Johnson County Community College  
THE JOURNAL

by **Walt Klarner**

"Look sharply after your thoughts. They come unlooked for, like a new bird seen on your trees, and, if you turn to your usual task, disappear; and you shall never find that perception again; never, I say--but perhaps years, ages, and I know not what events and worlds may lie between you and its return!"

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

The journal is a record of your thoughts and feelings. As a ship's log documents the exploration, the ports of call, and any unusual or interesting events, so your journal documents your reactions to new reading, people, ideas and situations. The journal allows you to read and therefore remember the intellectual and emotional events of this period of your life.

"I am always reminded, and now again by reading last night in Rousseau's Confessions, that it is not in the events in one's life, but in the faculty of selecting and reporting them, that the interest lies."

--Ralph Waldo Emerson

The journal is not a diary in the usual sense, although you might consider it to be an intellectual, selective extension of a diary. You are not writing about every thought or event; instead, you are choosing those which you feel may have worth for you later. Admittedly, this is difficult to do: to guess what aspects of the present may have a significant bearing upon the future. Sometimes we just don't know how an experience will affect us. Sometimes a trivial incident starts a thinking process that, years later, results in a career decision or a personality adjustment. And sometimes a traumatic experience or a major insight seems so insignificant just a few months later.

The journal does more than capture ideas and experiences; it allows you to express yourself freely, honestly, and without external criticism. The journal is your business; so you don't have to write to please other people. Indeed, it must please you! You can try on ideas and experiment with writing style. Usually, the journal is not passed around to be read by friends, to be

commented on by fellow students, or to be graded by an instructor. Your instructor never shares your journal, not even a single entry, with anyone.

Freedom does not mean writing without focus. Sharp images, clear ideas (even if they are in the form of questions), and penetrating inquiries--all are the marks of a successful journal. Because you don't have to worry about formal structures--such as the essay or a particular type of paragraph development, you can concentrate on the most natural, honest use of language. Many students find the journal frees them from "phony" writing.

"What can I write about?" So often a page remains blank because we assume that the day has been equally blank. If this is the case, go back over the day, reflecting over the events, the images, and the people. Try to remember any conclusions or confusions that developed. Examine your emotional responses (feelings) to specific situations. Attempt to bring to the surface the reasons for certain personal actions or responses of the day.

Don't overlook or discard a suitable subject for a journal entry just because it seems so average, common, or routine. The very truths of our lives are caught up in everyday happenings. Everyday, mundane experience is the heart of the journal. As you know, life is often not exciting, not a romantic adventure. Work, school, family, friends, commuting, dating, parenting, bills to be paid, lawns to be mowed, clothes to be washed--all these and more occupy our time. So it's a rare day that we climb a mountain, write a prize-winning novel, or appear as a guest on a television talk show. Keep the focus of your journal on experience, rather than on accomplishments.

Because you are a student, pay particular attention to ideas presented in your classes. Did specific opinions of a professor or a student interest you? Why? Did some aspect of a class disturb you? Why? Did you discover a new idea that requires investigation? Did you find yourself changing an attitude toward an idea, a course, or even your educational plans? School, work, and family experiences provide a wealth of ideas for journal entries. Reactions to television programming, news events, music, photographs, movies, art, and particularly intriguing places are often productive. Reading is an excellent source of ideas for journal entries.

If you don't read much, try to extend yourself with a magazine or newspaper article. Students who regularly read literature are exposed to many ideas, possibly more than the journal would ever require. Overall, try for balance, examining and capturing as wide a range of experience as possible.

Journal entries may be reflections on your progress as a writer, on your college life, or as prewriting for assignments. Journal entries may also be responses to reading assignments. The one thing journals are not is diaries. A diary is a personal reflection and not intended to be shared with others.

Writing Center

## Sample Journal Entry

Kelly Doe

Comp I – Prof. Dunker

1-30-07

Journal 1: “Calling Home” by Jean Brandt

Brandt is a first-year college student who wrote this essay for a memorable event assignment. In it, she reflects on the time when she was 13 and got caught for shoplifting a 75¢ Snoopy button.

Brandt begins her essay when she and her grandmother and older brother and sister are going Christmas shopping. She spots the Snoopy button in one of the stores and asks her sister if she should buy it, since they are supposed to be buying gifts for other people. Her sister tells her to go ahead. Brandt sees how long the lines are at the cashiers, so she decides it isn't worth a 30-minute wait to buy it. As she starts to put it back, she suddenly looks around and slips it into her pocket. She is sure no one has seen her. Then, as they are leaving the store, the security guard taps her on the shoulder and asks her to empty her pockets. She figures if she returns the button and says she's sorry, everything will be O.K. and she can go on her way. Instead, the security guard escorts her to the office and calls the police. Brandt's sister is left to explain to the grandmother and brother what happened to her. When the police arrive, they lead Brandt out of the store and through the mall, much to her embarrassment. At the police station, however, she views the search and questioning as somewhat exciting and fun, as though she is part of movie. This mood changes to remorse as soon as she realizes she must call home and explain what has happened. After telling her mother she is sorry, her mother responds, “I'm afraid sorry isn't enough. I'm horribly disappointed in you.” When Brandt's parents come to pick her up, she fully expects a harsh scolding. Instead, her parents silently walk her to the car. Her parents know the ordeal itself has been punishment enough. Brandt tells her readers that the incident was never again mentioned.

### Analysis and Response

1. From the dialogue, I can tell Brandt has a good relationship with her parents and that she is truly sorry for making such a stupid decision.
2. I like how she frames her essay with contrasting car rides—the exciting ride to the mall and the somber ride home from jail. The contrast makes the ending more powerful.

3. In her first draft, Brandt focuses more on the sequence of events. Her draft does not reveal to her audience the significance the event had on her. Her invention writing seems to help her think more about her readers and why she wants to share this story with them. By shifting her focus from the event to the confrontation with her parents, she is better able to share the significance.

I think lots of kids go through this. Maybe not getting caught—but feeling bad afterwards. One question I had that wasn't answered was, how did her grandmother respond? I guess since Brandt was focusing on her parents, it didn't matter about the grandmother or brother and sister. Still, I am curious how it affected her relationship.

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