

Assigning and Responding to Journals

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Q&A on Journal Assignments

Why assign a journal?

Composed of regular, informal entries, a journal asks students to maintain some continuing and fundamental, intellectual, and personal engagement with the subject matter of a course. Unlike papers or tests, journal entries can and often should be exploratory; they should raise questions for which the writer might not have an answer. Journals allow students to think on the page, and journals have the particular advantage of getting larger over time. If you assign journals, part of what you can encourage is the rereading of earlier entries and thus the reexamination of earlier questions or themes.

If I assign journals, must I read everything students write?

Not necessarily. In fact, sometime students will not want you to read anything. But students do need to feel convinced that the journal is important to you and important in their success in the course.

How can I make journals an important part of the course?

There are two ways of going about this.

First, make sure the journal counts toward the final grade in a significant way.

But that, by itself, won't prevent students from overlooking the journal until the end of the term. In fact, a journal's primary value lies in that it helps students do day by day in your course. So ask students to bring the journals to class every day, and use some of class time (5 minutes can be enough) to suggest entry topics and to give students time to actually start some entries. Five minutes won't be enough time to finish an entry, but it ought to be enough time to begin a train of thought that students can return to later, on their own time.

If on a given day you don't have any ready-made suggestions for a journal entry, ask students to suggest some possibilities, and ask them to copy those possibilities in their journals for reference later.

How can I grade journals?

The traditional method involves deciding on some sort of grading criteria, then reading the journals to see how well they fit the criteria. But you might also want to consider

asking students to evaluate their own journals according to criteria you provided (see “[Grading](#)” under “[Example assignment: Keeping a reflective journal](#)” below, and the “[Reflective journal self evaluation](#)” cover sheet and rubric that follow).

Students must then take responsibility for what they’ve done, or not done.

Such evaluations should be conducted at least twice (on the quarter system), once at a midterm, and then at the end of the term. The midterm evaluation asks for six copied pages of the journal as evidence supporting the evaluation. The final evaluation asks for twelve copied pages.

The following materials will introduce two archetypes for journals: reading journals and reflective journals. Either type or a mixture of both could be adapted to best fit a given course’s learning outcomes.

Reading Journals

Keeping reading journals can help students with reading comprehension, with retaining what they have read, and with making connections between texts and lectures and other course materials. The following are sample response formats and strategies by which reading journals can be organized.

Using very short entries

For quick entries that help you and students assess how well they understand texts, have students write a 25 word reading response.

For example, you could ask students:

For tomorrow, read X, pp_; then write an exactly 25-word precis stating the major theme of X.

Why that number? Because you can say a great deal in 25, well-chosen words. If you have more words, examine your precis for repetition. Consider combining or changing focus. Play with words; you will be amazed at how much you can say. If you are a word or two short, look for an important detail to add. Include the name of the author and the title of the piece; they don't count toward the 25 word total.

This assignment accomplishes a wide range of goals:

- Encourages students to read the assignment prior to class
- Leads them to make judgments about the material and reshape it in their own words
- Fosters class participation since they actively processed the information under discussion
- Allows them to play with words and language structures
- Helps them to refine skills in writing succinct statements
- Is very fast to mark (takes about 25 seconds per precis)

Using the double entry method

Ask students to keep reading notebooks, but to write "double entries" for each assigned reading.

On the right side of the notebook, they record reading notes, direct quotations, lists

and observational notes.

On the left side, they write notes *about* those right-hand side notes—summaries, questions, revisions, comments and personal responses.

Berthoff says that the double entry format provides a way for students to “conduct that continuing audit of meaning that is at the heart of learning to read and write critically. The facing pages in dialogue with one another”(Ann Berthoff, *The Making of Meaning*, Clairmount, NJ: Boynton-Cook, 1981).

Using the SQ3R method

To help with reading comprehension, you can have students use the “Survey, Question, Read, Retrieve, and Review” (SQ3R) method.

This is designed to help them understand their reading assignments better and to demonstrate to them that critical reading is an **active** process.

As students **survey** the reading assignments, they should note large headings, the first sentence of each paragraph, and the first answer to the following **questions**:

1. What is the main subject or topic of this text?
2. What do I expect the major points to be in discussing this topic?
3. What questions do I have that I hope will be answered by this text?

Students then **read** “with purpose,” i.e., to answer their questions and to see whether hypotheses are confirmed or denied—which is what good readers do.

After reading, students should try to **retrieve** the what they learned from the reading, drawing on their own memories.

Next, they should **review** the material, noting whether the major points and key questions they identified turned out to be accurate.

Example assignment: Keeping a structured reading journal

Engagement with the reading is a major component in this course. You will write a reading journal entry for each work or section of work assigned in the course. Journal entries will count in your grade. Your goal should be for each entry to reflect your thoughtful reading of the assigned work or section.

Guidelines:

1. Title each reading journal entry with the title, author, and page numbers of the

work.

2. Minimum acceptable length for an entry is about one page handwritten or one page typed (250-300 words). More is fine.
3. Reading journal entries may be written front and back to save paper.
4. For full credit, the journal entries must be turned in at the beginning of the class on the due date, before the work is discussed in class. Place your entries on the instructor's desk before class.
5. After entries are returned, they should be kept in a three-ring folder or binder. The entire journal must be turned in to the instructor at the end of the course.
6. Some suggestions on how to approach the reading journal entries follow. You may use any, all, or none of these.
7. To the right of the title of each entry, indicate the number of the suggestion you have used to write that entry.

Suggestions on how to approach the reading journal entries:

1. How do the ideas in this work challenge, stretch, or violate your usual ways of thinking?
2. Respond to this essay from the viewpoint of yourself as a writer.
3. Respond to this essay from the viewpoint of a teacher or future teacher of writing.
4. How is the essay organized? How effective is the organization? How does the writer support his or her claims? How convincing is the evidence?
5. Respond to some major point or question from the work, explaining why it is significant to the work as a whole.
6. What connection does this work have to you? To the educator? To your ideas? Or to people you know?
7. What in this work did you not understand? Ask questions and explore.
8. How does this work relate to other articles we have read? How do they engage in dialogue?
9. Write a rhetoric precis of the article.
10. Summarize the main points of the article
11. Own entry. Whatever else you want to say about the work

Obviously there is no “right” way to respond to any of these topics. But the more you think about the reading and reflect your thinking in the journal entries, the more your reading and writing will improve. I encourage you to try your ideas out. The purpose of this assignment is for you to improve your understanding of the readings by writing.

One goal of this course is to encourage and reward risk-taking in your thinking and writing. The reading journal is a particularly good place to try some things that are difficult or challenging.

The journal entries will be read and recorded daily. Normally I will not comment on them. If you would like a comment, response, or answer to a question, write “please respond” on the entry. The journal does count in your grade.

Reflective Journals

Reflective journals may be used to help students fulfill their *own* purposes.

For example, some might want to keep a section called “questions I don’t know the answers to,” while others might want to focus on *personal* responses to course material. An American history student might want to freewrite in her notebook about her personal, free-associative responses to material about the Civil War before going on to a more traditional, analytical approach to those same materials.

The following is a sample reflective journal assignment, complete with self-evaluation materials and a rubric.

Example assignment: Keeping a reflective journal

Description

One of your central learning activities this term will be keeping a journal. You should think of this writing as talking out loud or thinking out loud. And you should realize that some of your most interesting (to you) and productive journal entries may well begin with questions or notions that you haven’t really thought about much.

If you’re used to writing essays and tests only, then you’ll need to lower your standards in order to get the full benefits of your journal. Think about it: essays and tests ask you to be sure. They ask you to write clearly and authoritatively about a topic that you’ve come to some conclusions about (or even mastered). Part of the challenge of writing essays and tests lies in deciding for yourself what your conclusions are. No doubt you will come to conclusions this term, and you can certainly use your journal to reflect them and examine them. But you can and should also use the journal to try out new ideas, to pick up on some aspects of class discussion that you disagree with or agree with or that we didn’t get to fully air.

The journal can and should be your place to continue your class discussions. It can and should be your place to record your reactions to the reading you do. Your entries can agree with the reading, question it, argue with it, or just talk about what might be confusing.

If you end up temporarily lost or at a dead end, that’s reasonable and even useful. The point is that you’re using the journal to become fully involved in all the issues the course raises, and don’t forget to go back and reread earlier entries; sometimes they’ll still look accurate, sometimes they’ll look naive, and sometimes you’ll find that you now

have answers to earlier questions. These insights can become new entries.

Finally, use your journal to draw connections between this course and others you've had. Education is more than a menu of courses; education is often the links you find between them.

Grading

The journal counts for 20% of your grade, and it will be evaluated according to the three criteria: commitment, ambition and engagement. Your journals will not be graded according to correctness or paragraphing or sentence structure. So feel free to write quickly. Punctuate in a way that makes sense at the time.

You will be asked to evaluate your own journals once at midterm and again at the end. Both times an evaluation sheet will be provided; you'll see that this sheet gives descriptions of an "A" journal, a "C" journal and an "F" journal; "Bs" and "Ds" fall somewhere in between.

You'll be asked to evaluate your journal according to each criterion, using two or three sentences to explain your evaluation, and you'll then arrive at an overall grade.

At midterm, turn in your evaluation sheet with six copied pages of your journal; at the end of the term, I'll want your evaluation together with twelve copied pages choose your pages so that they support your evaluation.

I will read your evaluation, look at your supporting pages, and decide whether or not your evaluation seems reasonable. If I see some problem, I will ask for your entire journal.

Reflective journal self evaluation

Name _____

Date _____

Evaluation of COMMITMENT

Grade:

Reasons:

Evaluation of AMBITION

Grade:

Reasons:

Evaluation of ENGAGEMENT

Grade:

Reasons:

Overall grade:

An "A" journal	A "C" journal	An "F" journal
<p>COMMITMENT</p> <p>Shows regular and frequent entries—average 4+ per week. Entries are provocative, spirited, lively, and quite various.</p> <p>Entries may vary widely in length, but regularly go on for some time (more than a page) to reflect and accommodate extended thought.</p>	<p>COMMITMENT</p> <p>Regular but less frequent entries—3 per week on average. Entries themselves sometimes lively and spirited, sometimes a little tired or flat.</p> <p>Entries occasionally lengthy and complicated, but often brief and sometimes sketchy.</p>	<p>COMMITMENT</p> <p>Entries irregular, with noticeable time gaps between them. Or entries tend to bunch up, with perhaps two or three in a week, then no more for a week or 10 days. Overall, fewer than 3 entries per week.</p> <p>Entries rarely lengthy, usually brief, often fragmentary.</p>
<p>AMBITION</p> <p>Entries regularly try to stretch or to pose questions which engage the writer but for which the writer may have no ready answer. Entries willing to speculate, and to try to make connections between this and other courses.</p> <p>Entries show the writer willing and eager to draw connections between course material and the writer's lived experience. Writer is clearly trying to get as much from the journal writing as possible.</p>	<p>AMBITION</p> <p>Sometimes entries willing to pose questions or to speculate. But most entries discuss conclusions rather than reach for them. A few entries will try for connections outside the course, and some entries may include the writer's lived experience.</p>	<p>AMBITION</p> <p>Entries seem cursory, the result of coercion rather than interest. Little or no effort to speculate or to reach for more than obvious conclusions. Little or no attempt to connect to other courses or life outside this class.</p>
<p>ENGAGEMENT</p> <p>Entries show the writer has regularly reread earlier entries in order to comment on them, or find some order in them. Over time, the journal evolves a set of questions or concerns which are specific to this writer, and specific journal entries identify and explore these issues.</p>	<p>ENGAGEMENT</p> <p>Occasional entries show that the writer has reread earlier entries or has returned to earlier questions or issues. But overall, the journal gives only an intermittent sense of progress or of deepening understanding.</p>	<p>ENGAGEMENT</p> <p>Little or no evidence that this writer has reread earlier entries. Little or no sense of progress or understanding. Little or no sense that this writer has reflected on much beyond the immediate entry.</p>