

Journal Writing Overview

Benefits of Journal Writing

The quote “How do I know what I think until I see what I say?” by novelist E. M. Forster makes journal writing extremely relevant to students in the language arts classroom. Even in this crowded, technological world, there is still room for personal writing. Being able to express personal feelings in writing will always be vital to making sense of the world. Journal writing allows the writer to use words to express his or her understanding of literary concepts and to connect ideas from literature to his or her own life.

There are many benefits to using journal-writing strategies in the classroom. Journal writing provides a means for the student to absorb the complex themes presented in fictional narratives and record his or her reactions to new topics and ideas. Journal writing is a way for students to sort out all the new information and make sense of what they are learning. By writing in a daily journal, students become more comfortable with and confident in their writing and increase the number of words they are writing. This is another way for students to see their writing progress.

Journals mean different things to different educators, and they are used for a variety of purposes. However, the support for journal writing seems almost universal. Robert Yinger (1985, 31) states that “writing is a powerful tool for learning as well as for communicating.”

How to Implement Journal Writing

Incorporating journal writing into the language arts classroom is easy because it does not take much class time and there is little or no teacher preparation. Journals do not need to be graded; the focus is on content, not on students’ writing abilities or spelling, grammar, and punctuation skills. Be sure that students feel positive about writing each day in their journal. Do not make it seem like a punishment; your attitude as a teacher will mean everything.

Create or designate a journal for each student—and you—to use regularly. Students should date each entry so that it becomes a written record, documenting their growth and progress in learning. Be sure students have notebooks and pencils ready at journal time so that they can spend the entire time writing instead of looking for materials. Model good writing behavior by writing in your own journal.

Set aside a specific time each day during class for journal writing. Be sure to allow enough time for students to write a meaningful entry but not so much that it becomes boring and tedious. Select certain days throughout the week to have students share their journal entries with one another.



Dialogue Journal

Background Information

A Dialogue Journal (Staton 1980) is just what the name implies—a dialogue between two or more people. Dialogue Journals can be shared between a student and a teacher or between one student and another student. This strategy does entail more work for teachers, but the dialogue exchange and extra effort is rewarding and informative. Using this strategy, teachers can recognize areas of student concern or misunderstanding with respect to the language arts content as well as student progress in communicating thoughts and ideas in writing. Students benefit from having an audience for their writing and using writing as an authentic form of communication. The Dialogue Journal provides an excellent place for students to practice casual writing for an informal audience.



Grade Levels/Standards Addressed

See page 95 for the standards this strategy addresses, or refer to the Digital Resource CD (standards.pdf) to read the correlating standards in their entirety.

Stage of Writing Process

Draft

Activity

Designate a notebook or binder to be used as the Dialogue Journal. Ask students to respond to a prompt or question, or occasionally allow them to write about a topic of their own. Using a combination of both adds variety to the strategy. Students then exchange Dialogue Journals with the teacher or a peer who then reads the journal entry and responds to questions or adds comments. Then, exchange again and write a new entry to continue the dialogue.

Variation

Create a teacher-class Dialogue Journal for primary grade students. Or provide a question or a prompt with a frame for the answer to assist these students.

Differentiation

Remind English language learners that this is a personal assignment, so they can respond in a way that is comfortable for them. Allow them to choose how they would like to communicate. Challenge above-level students by giving them specific feedback that will stimulate challenging thoughts and ideas and develop more effective writing skills. Encourage them to research ideas further and write about their findings in the next journal entry. When dialoguing with below-level students, be sure to keep your writing clear, concise, and easy to read. Use the journal as an opportunity to challenge their thinking even if the reading or writing skills are not high. Carefully consider whom to pair these students with when journals are exchanged.

Dialogue Journal *(cont.)*

Grades 1–2 Example

Student: I like the book *Lilly's Purple Plastic Purse*. It reminds me of my own life. Once, I brought a new toy to school. My kindergarten teacher took it away because I kept playing with it.

Teacher: I like the way you connected the story to your own life. How did your situation end? Do you think Mr. Slinger acted fairly when he took Lilly's purse away from her?

Student: I do think that Mr. Slinger acted fairly. He had already asked Lilly to put the purse away and she didn't listen. He gave her the purse back at the end of the day. That was nice of him. I don't really know why Lilly got so mad at Mr. Slinger.

Teacher: Try to put yourself in Lilly's shoes. She was really excited about her purse. Then Mr. Slinger took it away. Do you think the way she acted was really bad?

Student: I still don't understand why Lilly was so mad. I think her picture of Mr. Slinger wasn't nice. I do think that it was good that Lilly used writing to share her feelings.

Grades 3–5 Example

Student: I learned a lot about plot structure during the class discussion today. I understand the concepts of introduction, rising action, and conflict, but I'm confused about the climax. How do you determine the climax of a story?

Teacher: That's an excellent question. The climax is when the conflict in the story is finally resolved. So first, you have to identify the conflict in the story and then use that information to determine the climax.

Student: Okay, that makes sense. Now I'm confused about the falling action, though. I thought the conflict was resolved in the events in the falling action.

Teacher: The bulk of the conflict is resolved in the climax of a story. The purpose of the events that occur in the falling action after the climax is to tie up all the loose ends of the story and show how the resolution of the conflict affected various characters. I think it is great that you are thinking critically about plot structure. Keep up the good work!



Dialogue Journal *(cont.)*

Grades 6–8 Example

Student: Today, we talked about different types of figurative language and why authors choose to use them in their writing. I understand the concepts of simile and metaphor, but I still don't really understand their purpose. Doesn't the use of figurative language make writing more confusing for the reader?

Teacher: Figurative language is used in fiction to engage the reader and make the writing more interesting. While it might seem as if it would make the text more confusing, figurative language is often used to add emphasis so the reader can gain a better understanding of the text. For example, I could say, "The whale was big," or I could say, "The whale was as big as a bus." Which statement helps you understand my point better?

Student: I see what you are saying. By comparing a whale to a bus, you made me understand its size. Is figurative language mostly used to describe physical appearances?

Teacher: Actually, figurative language can be used to describe almost anything. In addition to physical objects, you can use figurative language to describe feelings, actions, or experiences. For instance, I could say, "My feet flew down the street," as a way of describing how fast I was running, even though feet can't really fly. Try to challenge yourself to use examples of figurative language the next time you write a narrative piece—you may find you enjoy it!

Grades 9–12 Example

Student: I noticed how Emily Brontë repeatedly mentions the landscape and the moors throughout *Wuthering Heights*. Does she do this for a reason?

Teacher: You made a good observation about the repeated appearance of the moors in *Wuthering Heights*. Usually authors spend a great deal of time, often years, writing novels of this length, so I believe that the majority of the text was carefully planned. What do you think? What role could the moors play in the story?

Student: I think the setting is symbolic because moors are open, boggy land that cannot be cultivated. This setting gives the story a sense of foreboding, especially because Brontë mentions the possibility of drowning in the moor several times throughout the book.

Teacher: I agree with you about the setting being symbolic. I think Brontë uses the moor as a setting to show how nature can be a threat. Do you think it is relevant that the moors are infertile? Do you think it is symbolic that Catherine and Heathcliff play on the moors as children? We're going to be discussing the setting of *Wuthering Heights* in class tomorrow, and if you feel comfortable, I think it would be great if you would share your insight with the rest of the class.

Highlighted Journal

Background Information

The Highlighted Journal is a strategy that assists students in making connections with their learning. Students need to regularly write about fictional literature in their journals for at least a month before trying this strategy. Students read through their journals and highlight key points—significant information or discoveries, points from class discussions, or concepts from a language arts text. They then use this information to build knowledge around a variety of concepts. This strategy helps develop research skills by asking students to analyze their written work for trends, commonalities, main ideas, themes, etc. By drawing evidence from their own texts, students can compile their learning to support the analysis and research of literary concepts.



Grade Levels/Standards Addressed

See page 95 for the standards this strategy addresses, or refer to the Digital Resource CD (standards.pdf) to read the correlating standards in their entirety.

Stage of Writing Process

Prewrite

Preparation

Have students routinely write about fictional literature in their journals for at least a month so that they will have enough writing to analyze for this strategy. Consider implementing the Journal-Writing strategies in this section to provide students with purposeful journal-writing activities in which students produce writing that can be analyzed for this strategy.

Activity

Tell students to read through their journals, looking for key words or concepts, common themes, or interesting points. Provide highlighters or allow students to use pencils to underline key points in their journal entries. Ask them to share their highlighted selections and the reasons why they chose them with each other or with the class.

Variation

For a primary grade class using a single journal between the teacher and the class, read through the journal entries together and ask students to identify the key points to highlight.

Differentiation

Prompt English language learners to look for common words that they see throughout their journals, as these are likely some of the key concepts and important vocabulary words that they need to know. Using this strategy serves as an effective review tool for them. Consider having above-level students explain to the class how they chose their highlighted points. For below-level students, take time to explicitly model how to identify significant information or common ideas in your own journal before asking them to apply the strategy.



Highlighted Journal *(cont.)*

Grades 1–2 Example

November 2

The evil character in the story is the witch. She tries to trick the good character named Sammy. She wants him to go into the woods alone.

November 3

The peddlers are the bad characters. They try to fool Joshua. They want him to betray his family.

November 4

If you are not fair, you will not be happy. That is the point of the story.

November 7

The characters show that being kind is better than being evil.

Grades 3–5 Example

February 10

At the beginning of the story, the reader learns about the characters, Henry and Harry, and that the story will take place on a farm.

February 11

I think the setting is very important to the story. It sets the mood as dark and scary even before the plot begins.

February 12

One way that the author communicates his point of view is through his choice of setting. By writing about the beautiful landscapes in the Midwest, the author shows that he likes open prairielands.

February 15

I think the story would be more interesting if it took place in the future. The author's gloomy and negative attitude shows that he thinks our current society is doomed to fail. He does not give any suggestions for changing this path. If he set the story in the future, then he could suggest ways to change the world rather than just accept the way it is.

Highlighted Journal *(cont.)*

Grades 6–8 Example

January 8

There are three types of irony in literature: verbal, situational, and dramatic.

January 11

When Uncle Scott says, “The water is as clear as mud,” he is using verbal irony to indicate that the water was actually not clear at all. The use of irony in his speech tells the reader about Uncle Scott’s attitude and personality—he is a very sarcastic character.

January 12

It is ironic that Mark’s father, Steve, ends up writing for a travel magazine even though he rarely leaves his house and hates to travel. I think the author included this detail to show the reader that life is not always clear and sometimes situations turn out differently than expected.

Grades 9–12 Example

April 2

In *The Great Gatsby*, F. Scott Fitzgerald mentions a green light that Gatsby can barely see from his lawn. Is this light symbolic? What is its purpose?

April 7

Gatsby associates the green light with Daisy and reaches out for it. The green light seems to represent Gatsby’s dreams or desires.

April 9

Since we know that Daisy loosely represents the American dream, the green light also seems to be a symbol for Gatsby’s dreams about an idealized future. Later in the book, Nick compares the green light to how America must have seemed to the settlers when they first came to the new nation, again using the green light as a symbol for hopes and dreams.



Double-Entry Journal

Background Information

The Double-Entry Journal (Angelo and Cross 1993) is a strategy to help students summarize what they read and to connect the reading with their own words and understanding. A Double-Entry Journal has two columns: one for notes, paraphrasing, and summaries; and the other for entries that express students' thoughts in their own words. This strategy allows teachers to immediately gauge student comprehension of the objectives and use that information in future lessons. It also focuses on the prewriting skills of note-taking and information analysis. Students analyze, synthesize, question, and write about what they are reading as well as personalize and reflect on what they have learned.



Grade Levels/Standards Addressed

See page 96 for the standards this strategy addresses, or refer to the Digital Resource CD (standards.pdf) to read the correlating standards in their entirety.

Stage of Writing Process

Prewrite

Activity

Before reading a selected fictional text, distribute the *Double-Entry Journal* activity sheet (page 113, doubleentry.pdf). On the left side, have students write notes or summaries of the reading, and on the right side, have them record personal reflections, observations, or questions. Select passages to focus on content or clarify misunderstandings, or allow students to select their own passages because of particular interests or questions they have about them.

When students have completed both sides of their journal entries, have them draw arrows to show the connections and relationships between the summary of the content and their personal thoughts and reflections. This reinforces for students what they are learning.

Differentiation

For English language learners, scaffold the activity by providing notes and key concepts for the left column in simple sentences that are easy to understand. Have these students read and discuss the notes before writing about them. Once they have written the personal reflection, suggest that English language learners draw arrows to show connections between the notes and their own words. Challenge above-level students to also write what they are thinking about as they write their notes. Another term for this is *thinking aloud*. Once the note-taking, summarizing, and thinking aloud are completed, have students write personal reflections. For below-level students, have them focus on only one or two key points to summarize from the lesson. Instruct them to keep their notes brief and limited so they can focus on their personal reflection without being overwhelmed by too many concepts to discuss.



Double-Entry Journal *(cont.)*

Grades 3–5 Example

Text: *Stone Soup* by Marcia Brown

Text Passage	Student Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Three hungry soldiers come to a town to ask for some food and a place to sleep. • The townspeople hide their food and say there is no place to sleep. • The soldiers declare that they will make stone soup from water and stones. • Gradually, the townspeople each give a little food to the soup. • The whole town has a feast. • The townspeople think the soldiers are very wise to be able to make soup from stones, so they give the soldiers the best beds in town. • The soldiers continue on their way. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I like how the whole town ended up working together and contributing to make the soup. • I still don't understand if the townspeople understood that it was really them, not the soldiers, that actually created the soup.

Grades 6–8 Example

Text: *James and the Giant Peach* by Roald Dahl

Text Passage	Student Response
<p>“At this point, James slowly put down his chopper and turned and looked across at the two women who were standing underneath the peach tree. <i>Something is about to happen</i>, he told himself. <i>Something peculiar is about to happen any moment</i>. He hadn't the faintest idea what it might be, but he could feel it in his bones that something was going to happen soon. He could feel it in the air around him . . . in the sudden stillness that had fallen upon the garden” (Dahl 19–20).</p>	<p>I think Roald Dahl uses James's thought that something peculiar is going to happen to foreshadow upcoming events in the story. Like James, I don't know what will happen, but it makes me excited to keep reading the book. I think that this type of foreshadowing is interesting because the reader doesn't know if the upcoming event will be positive or negative.</p>

Double-Entry Journal *(cont.)*

Grades 9–12 Example

Text: *The House on Mango Street* by Sandra Cisneros

Text Passage	Student Response
<p>The chapter “My Name” in <i>The House on Mango Street</i> by Sandra Cisneros tells how Esperanza does not like her name. Even though it means “hope,” Esperanza thinks that it has too many letters and, in her view, it means “sadness” and “waiting” (Cisneros 10–11).</p>	<p>This chapter made me feel sad. Esperanza seems to really hate her name, even though it signifies something beautiful. Maybe Esperanza’s feelings about her name symbolize her lack of hope about her future, since her name means “hope.” Or maybe she feels like her parents have very high hopes for her since they gave her that name and she is worried about not meeting these expectations. I hope we learn more about Esperanza and her relationship with her name in upcoming chapters.</p>



Name: _____ Date: _____

Double-Entry Journal

Title: _____

Text Passage	Student Response
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Write the passage directly from the text.• Write notes from the text.• Write a summary of a section of text.	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• What are your reactions to the text?• What does it remind you of?• What questions do you still have?



Questioning Journal

Background Information

Journals allow students to reflect on their reading, leading to better classroom discussions and increased comprehension (Maria 1990). Journal writing allows students to integrate their knowledge of reading and writing so they can see how each skill can be used to support the other. In the Questioning Journal, students record their questions about the reading as they arise and then note any answers or relevant information about their questions as they continue reading. This strategy is similar in format to the Double-Entry Journal strategy, but the emphasis is on questioning rather than summarizing. The Questioning Journal is used before, during, and after a reading so that students can record their questions as they occur and also draw evidence from the text to provide answers to their questions and material for further reflection.



Grade Levels/Standards Addressed

See page 96 for the standards this strategy addresses, or refer to the Digital Resource CD (standards.pdf) to read the correlating standards in their entirety.

Stage of Writing Process

Draft

Activity

Distribute the *Questioning Journal* activity sheet (page 117, questioning.pdf) to students before beginning the reading selection. Instruct students to record their questions about the text in the left-hand column and their thoughts, answers, or other information relevant to their questions in the right-hand column. If appropriate, the teacher may choose to narrow the scope of students' questions in order to focus on specific literary elements. For example, a teacher might ask students to record their questions concerning the characters in the story and how they develop over the course of the text. Encourage students to take the time to stop and record their questions as they occur rather than reading on in hopes that the text will answer the questions.

Differentiation

For English language learners, provide a list of sample questions to help guide their thinking and writing for the left-hand column. Encourage them to complete the reflection and analysis independently, asking for assistance from the teacher or their peers when necessary. Below-level students will benefit from a shorter text selection. These students may have an abundance of questions, so help them choose several important ones to focus on. Multiple readings of the text selection will also help them draw the relevant information from the text to answer their questions. Above-level students should be instructed to ask more complex questions rather than simpler, factual questions about the text. Guide them in developing questions about literary concepts such as theme, symbolism, and imagery that will deepen their reading comprehension.



Questioning Journal *(cont.)*

Grades 3–5 Example

Text: *Charlotte's Web* by E. B. White

Questions	Relevant Information/Answers
Why did Mr. Arable want to kill Wilbur?	Mr. Arable was going to kill Wilbur because he was the runt of the litter, but I'm still not sure what <i>runt</i> means.
What does the word <i>runt</i> mean?	The runt is the smallest animal in the litter. The runt of a litter is often weak and sometimes does not survive for very long. Mr. Arable thought Wilbur would die anyway.
Why did Wilbur have to go live with the Zuckermans?	Mr. Arable still sees Wilbur as something to be bought and sold, not as a pet, and he is concerned that Fern will get too attached to Wilbur. They compromise by selling Wilbur to Fern's uncle down the road.

Grades 6–8 Example

Text: *Of Mice and Men* by John Steinbeck

Questions	Relevant Information/Answers
Why does George stick with Lennie after Lennie gets them in trouble at the last farm where they worked?	George has assumed the responsibility to care for Lennie, and he sees Lennie as his friend. Lennie and George are united by a common dream of owning their farm with a house and a rabbit hutch.
What is the significance of Candy's dog in the story?	Candy loves his old dog although he cannot voice these feelings. In the end, he lets Carlson shoot his dog, but then Candy wonders whether he should have done it himself. Candy's relationship with his dog seems to parallel George's relationship with Lennie.
How could George shoot Lennie at the end of the story?	George shot Lennie to save him from Curly's lynch mob. He knew that Lennie would experience nothing but suffering after he killed Curly's wife, and he wanted to save him from that. George knew that Lennie depended on him, so he had to do what he thought would limit Lennie's suffering.



Questioning Journal *(cont.)*

Grades 9–12 Example

Text: *The Kitchen God's Wife* by Amy Tan

Questions	Relevant Information/Answers
What is the relationship between Helen and Winnie?	Although they are not blood sisters, they act just like siblings. They have huge fights, but they also share a very special and deep bond. Helen is the only person that knows Winnie's real story.
Why does Winnie keep cleaning her house?	Winnie starts to clean when she wants to forget something from her past. It seems like she uses it as a distraction from things she does not want to think about or remember.
Why does Winnie hide in her aunts' greenhouse?	When Winnie goes to live with her aunts, she feels out of place and unwanted. Her uncle built the greenhouse so he could practice a western hobby, gardening. When he got bored with gardening, the greenhouse just became a storage shed. Winnie finds a painting of her mother in the greenhouse, giving the location special significance.



Name: _____ Date: _____

Questioning Journal

Text: _____

Questions	Relevant Information/Answers

