

writing to explore: a journal writer's guide for students abroad



developed by

mary salibrici

anna creadick

professors of writing & rhetoric

&

doug reilly, programming coordinator

(Hobart and William Smith Colleges
Center for Global Education)

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part one: what is a journal and what is it good for?



A journal or diary is a book of dated entries. The contents may be eclectic, reporting the day's events, or one's observations, feelings, dreams, or dialogues, or drawing sketches, diagrams, notations, recipes, or quotations from and comments on current reading material—whatever the writer wants to leave as documentation of his or her passage through time. As such, a journal is a tool for recording the *process* of our lives. By engaging in journal keeping we assume that we are capable of having a relationship with our own minds and that we can build into our consciousness a point of observation of ourselves as well as our environments. (Adapted from Charles Steckler's class notes: "*Immagini e Annotazioni di passaggio: Sightseeing and sights unseen: Italy, Spring 2001*")

okay, but what *is* it?

Physically, a journal is essentially an empty book that you intend to fill with whatever you want. You can make them, buy them online or on-location at bookstores and art supply stores, where they are often called "blank books" or "sketchbooks".

Journals are extremely individual kinds of things, and many journal-writers (including some of those presenting this workshop) admit to fetishizing certain pens and certain journal types that they *have to have* or they can't write! (The travel writer Bruce Chatwin [[Songlines](#), [In Patagonia](#),] bought a hundred Moleskine-brand journals before one of his trips and had people sent him new batches as he filled them: he hated writing in anything else.) Others can and do write on or in anything at all. In general, however, we recommend you try to find a journal that balances personality and functionality. Some questions to ask:

Do you like lines or blank pages? Lines are fine for writing but some don't like them for scrap-booking (pasting found objects into your journal) or sketching.

How big should it be? Will you keep it in a backpack or do you want it to fit in your coat pocket?

Do you want your journal to have a lock or an elastic to hold it closed?

What kind of paper do you want? Textured? Plain? White? Natural? Colored?

Spiral bound so you can fold it over or hardbound so it's more like a book?

what else do I need?



A pen or pencil, obviously. Again, some people are picky about these, others couldn't care less. If you are among the former (the fetishists), make sure to bring a good supply of what you like with you. You might not find the same brand elsewhere.

A gluestick. Great for pasting in things you wrote on scraps of paper, brilliant ideas scribbled on napkins, as well as images for collages, pictures, brochures, stamps, postcards, matchbox covers, etc. Don't leave home without one. (and don't mistake it for your lip balm...)



what is a journal good for?

Journals are good for capturing experiences.

Journals are good for developing all senses in service of "deeper seeing".

Journals are good for interpreting what we see and teasing out the meanings of these experiences for our existence.

Journals are good for reflecting on both our experiences and our attempts to capture and analyze them in order to learn about ourselves as explorers.

Journals are good for documenting and reflecting on *how we change*.

Journals are spaces where we can express ourselves with total freedom.



in your hands, the journal is a powerful tool of exploration and reflection

part two: kinds of writing

Journal-keepers can take a variety of approaches to their work. The writing can be introspective, including not only a discussion of what they see, but also of how it makes them feel, how they are effected by the scene before them. The writing can be analytical, trying to get at the relationships underlying the social interaction they are observing. The writing can be humorous or serious, direct or metaphorical.

In the workshop, presenters discuss three overall types of writing: descriptive, interpretive/reflective and process-reflective. The following techniques, partially adapted from Charles Steckler's class materials, expands on this schema and provides further ideas for how you can use your journal.

description

According to Mary Salibrici, this type of writing has great sensory appeal. That is, when we read description, we are brought into what something looks like, feels like, sounds like, tastes like, smells like, and so on. If we write descriptively to capture the sensory nature of something/place/person/event, then when we go back later and read such writing, we can perhaps get the sense of reseeing, rehearing, refeeling it. Descriptive writing, then, would empower us to remember something/place/person/event - - to experience it again. Highly descriptive language obviously depends on adjectives, the part of our speech that describes, but it can also rely on colorful verbs to convey description. Also think about the power of metaphor when writing descriptively. Thus, use questions like "what does something look like?" or "what does something sound like?" to create powerfully descriptive comparisons.

catharsis

Cathartic writing releases and expresses emotions. It is often done under the pressure of an immediate emotion: anger, surprise, amazement, elation, frustration, confusion, etc. Cathartic writing can be incoherent or contradictory. The page is used to express emotions with little attempt to analyze them. Cathartic writing is often distinguished by the handwriting—the emotion may be felt in the script. Cathartic writing can exaggerate and distort. Later, one can take a cathartic passage (or the experience that generates it) and reflect on it. Catharsis is a great technique for expressing the frustration at the miscommunications and "foreign" cultural norms that irritate us while abroad, as well as the wonder and excitement of beautiful experiences.

free intuitive writing

This technique comes from a deep place in the psyche. Also known as free association, stream-of-consciousness, spontaneous writing. Relax. Empty your mind. Think of nothing. Wait for something to enter your mind. Start writing. Nothing is irrelevant or silly. Nonsense doesn't exist in this technique. Write quickly. Don't censor yourself. Avoid looking at the page or even close your eyes. Ignore rules of punctuation and grammar, or capitalization. Write in different directions on the page.

reflection

Reflection is the contemplation of the intellect. It is the observation of the process of one's life. It happens when you stand back momentarily and see connections and significance that had gone unnoticed before that moment. Reflection often follows description, catharsis or free-intuitive writing. In reflection you are creating the meaning of your life and experiences. Times of change in life often seem pregnant with meaning...and reflective writing can help you organize and better

understand these transition times (of which study abroad is often a huge one for one's personal development).

Mary Salibrici writes: "Perhaps you've written several highly descriptive journal entries about a thing/place/person/event, and now you want to consider what such an experience means to you. This would be the place to begin interpreting the experience in a more reflective way. This is more of a critical thinking skill than straight descriptive writing because it allows you to identify issues, concerns, or even problems that emerge from your experiences and then to understand the deeper significance. This kind of writing provides you with a more systematic way of looking back on something/place/person/event with a more critical eye. When I use this in class with my students, I often call it *thinking from the ceiling* in order to encourage the notion that it represents thinking from a distance or thinking in terms of connections or disconnections."

lists

Lists can help you organize your thoughts and experiences. This technique can often work well when you are overwhelmed by something and cannot formulate clear thoughts in full sentences, or when you only have a short amount of time in which to record something. Lists can include: things you did or want to do, places you visited, books you read or will read, people you know, foods you ate, favorites and least-favorites, things you value, ideas you live by, and of course, the generic "things to do". This list of lists is not exhaustive. A list can be about anything at all.

portraits

Portraits are a form of descriptive writing that may include reflective elements or other techniques of writing. When writing a portrait, you are trying to capture the essential elements or character of a person (or sometimes, a place or thing when it seems to have such a depth of character that it seems to us *like* a person.) Portraits also reflect the identity of the writer. Here's an example of a word portrait (with elements of a list) from John Steinbeck's Cannery Row:

Cannery Row in Monterey in California is a poem, a stink, a grating noise, a quality of light, a tone, a habit, a nostalgia, a dream...

Alternately, this portrait of Mazie Gordon, a ticket-taker at a Bowery movie house in New York City, by the New Yorker's Joe Mitchell (Up in the Old Hotel):

A bossy, yellow-haired blonde named Mazie P. Gordon is a celebrity on the Bowery. In the nickel-a-drink saloons and in the all-night restaurants which specialize in pig snouts and cabbage at a dime a platter, she is known by her first name. She makes a round of these establishments practically every night, and drunken bums come up behind her, slap her on the back, and call her sweetheart. This never annoys her. She has a wry but genuine fondness for

what can go in my journal? (a list)

thoughts & experiences
dreams & plans
pains & triumphs
notes
product wrappers
tickets
currency & stamps
photos
"found pictures" (magazines, brochures, etc)
newspaper clippings
postcards
sketches and drawings
coasters & matchbooks
love letters

bums and is undoubtedly acquainted with more of them than any other person in the city. Each day she gives them between five and fifteen dollars in small change, which is a lot of money on the Bowery.

altered point of view

In this technique, the writer assumes a point of view other than his/her own. He/she may choose to narrate an experience from the third person. Mary may write “Mary walked out of her host-family’s house to find the usually-quiet street filled with people...” It feels strange to write but it’s a great way to explore other perspectives and also to examine yourself with a little more objectivity. Maybe you can begin to see yourself a little more as others see you! You can also change points of view so that you see things from the eyes of a total “other”. Try writing about the lives of the people around you from *their* point of view. You may have lots of information to work with, or you may have to make it up. But this kind of writing is not about accuracy (as a portrait is), it’s about new ways of seeing.

unsent letter

Letters are great because they force you to explain things—the place you are living in, the experiences you are having, the emotions you are feeling, to somebody who cannot relate to or “see” what you are talking about. There’s the benefit of an audience. You may have to explain something about the culture or history of a place or people for someone to understand your story. But letters are limited by self-censorship; you know someone else is going to read this and so you may edit your own expression, leave out some disturbing details or emotions to avoid worrying your audience or revealing too much about yourself. The “unsent letter” preserves the benefit but ejects the limitation, because these letters are never meant to be sent. They are written to a person (real or imaginary) in the spirit of total honesty. One of the reasons people have traditionally used the phrase “dear diary” is to provide just this kind of audience to the writer. The audience becomes a clean slate, a unprejudiced reader (or listener).

the sent letter

Letters to friends and family (and this includes email) are also a wonderful form of “journaling”—one that has an actual and intended audience. If you read “The Uganda Dispatches” in part five, you’ll see some of the ways in which having an audience can help you focus your writing. Having an audience *does* constrict what you write because you have to take into account the possible reactions of the audience. For example, a detailed description of a scary experience may worry your parents unnecessarily, for example. And you may not feel comfortable writing your friends about some of the changes you might be experiencing. So there are positives and negatives. One suggestion: make sure you tell the recipients to save those letters and emails...especially if they’re the only documentation you’ll have!



Write a letter you
don’t intend to
send...

dialogue

A dialogue is a conversation on paper. Dialogues can take several forms. Combining with description, a dialogue can be a recreation (as accurate as you can make it) of an actual conversation. Or, alternately, a dialogue can be made up. It can be between any two (or more) “characters”. You and a friend. You and the imaginary audience you created above (giving the “unrecipient” of the unsent letter a chance to respond!). Two people you overheard at a café. A conversation you wish you had with someone. The benefits of writing dialogues is that the

technique forces you to write from several different points-of-views (or voices) at once. It can break up the long sections of “I” sentences.

cliché and the journal writer

In general, cliché are habitual words or phrases used to communicate meaning. Some cliché are sayings—“A stitch in nine saves time,” some are phrases—the middle of nowhere, and some are images or stock characters—the politician kissing a baby, the writer/philosopher smoking and wearing a beret, the homeless bum who’s really a genius/kindly samaritan/royal in disguise.

Journal-writers abroad should beware of overused expressions and should strive to find new metaphors and ways of describing. Journal-writers abroad should avoid one thing above all, however—the travel cliché. This kind of cliché exists for two reasons. One is the need to generalize about a place (Germans are organized, Spanish are relaxed, Italians are romantic.) in order to explain it to others. As such it is an innocent and understandable habit, but recognize also that it obscures reality and contributes to the formation of stereotypes. Two (and this is *not* innocent!) the tourist industry trades in cliché (ones that are condescending if not outright racist) to sell the idea of places to potential tourists. Think of any ad you’ve ever seen about a cruise. You get the same main idea: a floating party that occasionally drops anchor on a “pristine” island beach where the only “locals” are there to serve you food or play music. African safaris are sold with a similar racism: a vast landscape populated by exotic animals and relatively few (black) people who drive the land rovers or sing in polyphony at the home camp. There are many other less insidious but no less ridiculous travel clichés: a couple on a gondola in Venice, a Bavarian in lederhosen hoisting an unrealistically large mug of beer with an idiotic grin, a Japanese monk in a “pristine” natural setting with mist and rock formations that somehow suggests ancient wisdom. Paris, the lover’s city. Prague, the golden city. All of these clichés obscure the reality of real places with real people living real lives full of real problems as well as real joy.

To get beyond travel cliché, play with the conventional images and open your eyes to what is obscured. Do regular Venetians use gondolas day-to-day? Do they drive cars too? Get out of the amusement-park of old town Prague and see where most city residents live and spend their days. Try to get to know Japanese people; where do they work, what do they do for fun, how do they live? Do their homes have *tatami* mats or tables and chairs? Try to find out where the African park ranger *lives*, where his children go to school, what his economic, social and political reality is. Concentrate on the day-to-day lives of the local people; this is the difference between studying abroad and taking a package trip.

online journals (blogs)

Not all journals are private, and not all journals are kept in paper and pencil. The internet revolution has taken hold of the diary and created the *blog*, short for “web log”. Blogs are easily-updatable web pages where people can keep a running journal. Usually a person’s blog will have some personal information as well as a description of the themes the person will most likely write about. Simple blogs are *free* and you can log into them from any internet connection and update your page. So why not write a blog and tell your friends and family about it...that way you don’t have to send a million emails. Try blogger.com, modblog.com, or blog-city.com

part three: exercises for journal writers

people watcher

Set yourself up in a café, restaurant or other public place and describe the people that pass by. You can do so realistically (based only on what you can sense) or interpretively, trying to extrapolate their character, occupation, or destination from what you can observe.

prisoner of the plaza

Confine yourself to a public space (plaza, café, market, etc) for one hour (make sure there's a bathroom there—and anything else you will need in that time) and record your observations. Start in your journal by describing the space itself and the boundaries you have set. You may even draw a diagram of the space and your vantage point within it. Describe also why you chose that place in particular. Then just concentrate on being aware of what's happening around you—and documenting it.

remembered conversation

Try to reconstruct a conversation you had with a member of your host family or another local person. Record what details you remember about the moment: the time of day, weather, mood, what the person was wearing, etc.

constructed conversation

Choose a character that you see every day and invent a conversation with the person. If you're brave enough, try to actually talk to that person and compare the dialogues.

color focus

Choose a color and write about where you see that color during an entire day. You can write as you go throughout the day, or try at the end of the day to remember where you noted it. You can do this with shapes, objects, smells, etc. The idea is to become aware of something you may have overlooked before.

timed or limited writing

Set an amount of time and try to write during the entirety of it. It may be cathartic, free intuitive, or descriptive. Stop when the time is up. Timed writing forces you to write and can break a creative "block".

I remember...

Begin with these words. You may end up writing about one event that you experienced in the past day/week/month or you may end up with a list of impressions and images you collected over that span of time.

daily life

Describe your daily routine as if you are writing it in a letter to someone. Remember that they don't know the place you are living so be sure to explain things that wouldn't be obvious or clear. (A variation of the unsent letter, you can replace the topic of this exercise with anything you wish: your trip to Madrid, your daily walk to class, etc.)

recipe

Ask your host-mother, a waiter at a restaurant, or a person at the market-place how they prepare a certain dish or type of food. Write down as much of the detail as you can. It helps if it's a food you really like!

brand loyalty

Choose your favorite local product (the one you think you'll miss the most) and write about it in your journal. Why do you like it? Paste its wrapper next to your description or sketch it.

the nose

Spend a day noting not what you see or hear, or what you smell. They may be pleasant or not, but smells are linked with the most powerful memories. For some time after studying in Spain, one of the workshop presenters would wake up with the scent of his host-mother's apartment in his mind, a phenomenon which would open up a very direct (and bittersweet) kind of connection with the past. Try to describe how these smells make you feel. Later on, when you read back, you may want to try to recall these stimuli and write another comment about how they make you feel now. Perhaps leave some space for these future thoughts.

the revision

Look back at an older journal entry in which you described an event, and try to describe the same thing again, this time trying to pull details out of a more distant memory. Don't worry about discrepancies—the point of this activity is to realize the fluid nature of human memory.

reflection of things past

Take a significant journal entry and write *about that entry*. What does it suggest about who you are or how you have changed abroad? What does it say about you as a writer?

small pleasures

Find out what local people do for diversion, and take part. Then, write about it. What does the choice of activity say about the people? What did you like/dislike about it?

haiku

Haiku are short poems of three lines with the syllabic pattern of five, seven, five. They are easy and fun to write. They evoke, in a very compact, crisp way, an image, scene or emotion. They are traditionally used to capture things that aren't beautiful in the conventional sense or small details that often go unnoticed. And sometimes the last line "turns" the poem in a surprising direction:

Pines on near mountains
Red berries on bare branches
All wear hats of snow

People sit silent
While the fire dances and sings—
How can they not join?

change

What does change mean for you? How have you changed over the course of your term abroad? This is a great topic to reflect upon and write about, not only as your experience comes to a close, but also along the way. How do you feel different? What new values have you developed? What old values are you now starting to reject? Write again once you are "home" for a while.