



# Journaling With Teens

Lynn Blinn Pike, MU Extension State Specialist  
Human Development and Family Studies

## What is teen journaling?

Teen journaling is a tool for helping teens understand themselves better. Because it is a form of personal expression, journaling can occur in many ways: writing, drawing, collages, sketches, pictures, newspaper clippings, photos, painting, scribbling and many other forms. Its purpose is to (1) help adolescents gain a more positive perspective on their lives by developing an awareness of events, memories and feelings in their lives; and (2) help adolescents learn coping skills that can be used throughout life. At the same time, journaling can also help adolescents to use their imaginations and natural creative talents, to improve their communication skills, and to realize self-interests and possibilities.

Journaling activities can be designed to help young people gain insights into the major areas of their lives — including relationships with peers, parents and other adults, their bodies and health issues, and careers and other special interests.

## Uses of journaling

As Lucia Capacchione states in her 1989 book, *The Well-Being Journal*, “the privacy and personal nature of the journal make it a perfect vehicle for



spontaneous expression and discovery. Journal-keeping that is done for yourself alone provides one ingredient so essential to true exploration: freedom from externally imposed standards and judgements. The journal is a safe place to be yourself; to feel, think, observe, and dream. As long as it is kept confidential, except for selective sharing, then the threat of external criticism is removed. The only critic you are left with is yourself... ”

There are lots of situations and settings where journaling can help teens: at home, at school, while traveling, etc. Journaling is especially useful during difficult times, such as family crises, relocation, divorce or separation, school classes, grade changes, illness or injury, addition of a new family member, loss of a loved one, conflict with

others and job changes. These events are often accompanied by strong feelings, such as physical or emotional pain, confusion, insecurity, anger, fear, sadness or grief. At such times, journaling can be used as a “good friend,” a place to express difficult feelings.

Sometimes it is hard to put these feelings into words, so drawing, doodling, or even scribbling can be a perfect way to let them out. At other times, the words may be there inside, but there is no one to talk with about them. So the journal becomes a “listener” without blaming or judging.

## Where to journal

Journaling on a regular basis is a good way to acquire the habit and skills, although you need not journal every day. However, the more often you journal, the more skillful you become. Try to find a time of day when it feels comfortable.

Journaling is best done in a comfortable, relaxing and quiet setting, free from interruptions and distractions. Some people like to observe a few minutes of silence before beginning in order to focus one’s attention. Others prefer low-volume inspirational background music. If there’s tension in any part of the body, try and relax. Plan to spend 10 to 30 minutes journaling; less

than 10 minutes is usually not enough time for expressing thoughts and feelings. But the time spent is somewhat dependent upon what is to be written or drawn.

## Common journal writing techniques

- **Dialogue:** a written conversation between an individual and another person or self.
- **Timed, free writing:** free expression or “stream of consciousness” of thoughts without lifting pen from paper for 2 to 5 minutes.
- **Lists** of people, events, things, feelings, etc.
- **Cartoons:** using cartoon characters to express feelings, offer solutions to problems or have a conversation.
- **Poems:** free verse or rhymes to tell a story or express feelings.
- **Revisiting:** reviewing and reacting to previous journal entries.

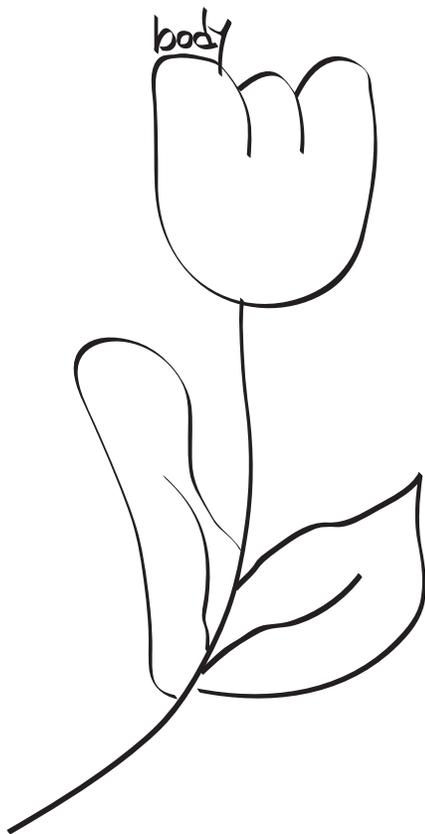


Illustration from a teen's journal.

## Materials for journaling

The sky's the limit for journaling materials and supplies! With so many options you may feel confused as to what is really needed to get started. How do you decide? Not to worry — once you start journaling, you will develop a better feel for personal style, and the wide array of possibilities won't seem so overwhelming. However, if you are unsure about where to start, the following suggestions may be helpful.

### Paper

Paper may be lined or unlined. Some say that unlined paper helps spark the creative processes. The type of paper can vary as well. If including art activities, it should be heavy or thick enough to handle glue, markers and possibly paint — you don't want the colors, ink or glue to bleed through the pages! You may want to purchase already bound journals (e.g., a spiral bound 9" x 12" size with 60-lb. weight paper is recommended), or you may want to create your own binders, sketchbooks, portfolios or scrapbooks.

### Writing tools

There is an endless assortment of pens, pencils, markers, crayons and brushes available at grocery stores, art supply stores, bookstores, scrapbooking stores, sewing stores and even on the Internet. Colors help express feelings and are more fun to use!

### Art supplies and other materials

Other art materials include, but are not limited to, erasers, stickers, paints, watercolors, glue, patterns, ribbons, lace, fabric, stamps, photos, scissors, magazines and newspapers.

### Other journaling tips

Use journaling as a springboard or gateway to spark teen creativity and

free expression. But because journaling is a means of understanding yourself, self-honesty is very important. That's why privacy is also important, and why journals should be kept in a safe, private place. Each journal entry should be dated so that the journal becomes a personal history of growth and experience. But at the same time, don't worry about spelling, grammar, penmanship or punctuation.

## Group journaling

Group journaling activities in schoolwork or 4-H activities may include sharing particular entries with classmates, teachers or group leaders who can be trusted — meaning someone who doesn't criticize, ridicule or put down the journaler or journaling activities. If group journaling activities stir up intense feelings or emotions, the group leader should be prepared to provide comfort or referral to a counselor or mental health professional.

### Ground rules for journaling in a group setting

- Sharing is always optional.
- Whatever is expressed is personal, private and confidential — not to be discussed outside the group session.
- Participants should respect the group leader's efforts to create a quiet, calm and “meditational” atmosphere for the exercise.
- Participants have the right to abstain from any journaling activities that are uncomfortable or emotionally upsetting.

### Spontaneity

Journaling activities are not sacred. If you want to change an activity to fit your style as an individual or as a member or leader of a group, feel free

*(continued on page 4)*

# A group journaling workshop

Below is an outline for a group journaling workshop for teens. The eight sessions are based on the Damon and Hart (1988) Self-Understanding Interview. Each session consists of a warm-up exercise, journaling, and optional sharing with the group. The workshop leader offers prompts for each exercise, and stresses that no one should feel pressured to share.

## Session 1: Self-definition

### Warm-up prompt:

- Freewrite or draw for two minutes. Make lists of words or drawings to describe yourself.

### Journaling prompts:

- How would you describe yourself?
- How would your friends describe you?
- How would you like to be described?

### Sharing prompt:

- Why is it important to understand yourself?

## Session 2: Self-examination

### Warm-up prompt:

- Draw yourself or anything that represents you. Give your drawing a title.

### Journaling prompts:

- What are you especially proud of about yourself?
- What are you the least proud of about yourself?

### Sharing prompt:

- What does what you wrote say about you?

## Session 3: Self as body, mind and soul

### Warm-up prompt:

- Draw something that represents your body, mind (i.e., thoughts, feelings, fears, joys, etc.), and soul (heart, values, passions, dedications, devotions, spirituality).

### Journaling prompts:

- Have a written conversation with your body. Write anything you would like to say to your body, and then listen to whatever your body says to you.

### Sharing prompt:

- What does what you wrote say about you?

## Session 4: Self-interest

### Warm-up prompt:

- Draw something or someone that you feel so strongly about you could change your life for, move for, etc.

### Journaling prompts:

- What is this person like?
- How do you find joy being with this person?
- How are you like this person?

### Sharing prompts:

- What does what you wrote say about you?

## Session 5: Continuity

### Warm-up prompt:

- Make a three-part collage that depicts you as a child, you in the present, and you in the future. (Note: The leader provides magazines, scissors, and glue.)

### Journaling prompts:

- Imagine that you have to explain your collage to someone else. What would say about each of the three parts?
- How does your collage make you feel?
- What did you learn about yourself from doing this?

### Sharing prompts:

- How do you feel about your collage?

## Session 6: Agency

### Warm-up prompts:

- Draw a line like this in your journal:

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Birth	Mid-life	Death
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- Mark where you are now in your life with a star.
- Number four or five events in your life, in order, on the line.
- List the numbered events.

### Journaling prompt:

- Pick one event and write about how it made you the person that you are today.

### Sharing prompt:

- Can you control the events in your life?

## Session 7: Distinctiveness

### Warm-up prompts:

- Take a picture of yourself and give it a title. (Note: The leader provides a Polaroid camera.)
- Draw, label, or scribble on or around your picture.

### Journaling prompt:

- Write about how the photo reflects your uniqueness in body, mind, and/or soul.

### Sharing prompt:

- Is there anyone else like you?

## Session 8: Review and reflection

*(Note: Before this session, participants receive a gift certificate to a local crafts shop where they can make a necklace or bracelet that represents them in some way.)*

### Warm-up prompt:

- Share your necklace or bracelet and tell how it represents you.

### Journaling prompts:

- How would you describe yourself?
- How would your friends describe you?
- How would you like to be described?

### Sharing prompt:

- Go back to Session 1 and read what you wrote the first time. How has your description of yourself changed or stayed the same?

to do so. Be creative and use your imagination.

## Quotes from teens' journals

- “Tonight this...made me feel good about myself and I learned how creative I can be even if I don't know what I'm doing.”  
— 17-year-old
- “Today's (journaling) has really helped me understand more about me and what I want in life and some of the steps I have to take to get there.”  
— 19-year-old
- “After doing these activities I am glad...because it's good for me to think about myself and my thoughts and feelings, which I don't always do on a regular basis.”  
— 17-year-old
- “Today I can say that I'm not stressed. I'm feeling good about myself and proud of me. Happy to make new friends where ever I go, wanting to try to make something of myself 'cause that's what people want from me!”  
— 17-year-old

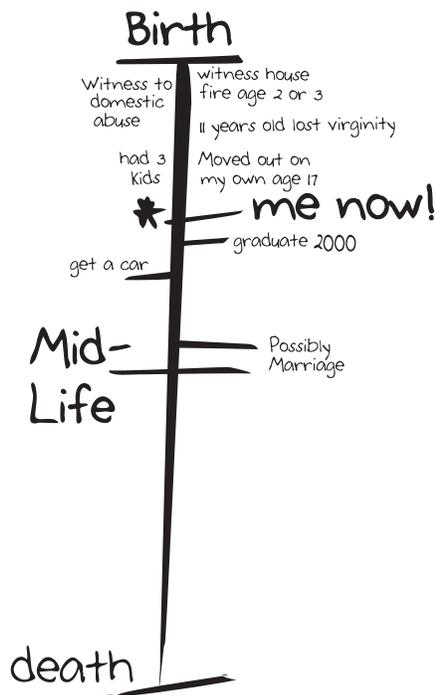


Illustration from a teen's journal.

## Web sites on journaling

Journals @ miningco.com

<http://journals.miningco.com>

Journals and Diaries @ Yahoo!

[http://dir.yahoo.com/Social\\_Science/Communications/Writing/Journals\\_and\\_Diaries/](http://dir.yahoo.com/Social_Science/Communications/Writing/Journals_and_Diaries/)

Progoff Intensive Journal® Program

<http://www.intensivejournal.org/>

Scrapbooks @ Yahoo!

<http://dir.yahoo.com/Recreation/Hobbies/Scrapbooks/>

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University Outreach and Extension at the University of Missouri-Columbia is available to train professionals and parents on journaling with teens. Please contact:

**Lynn Pike, 314 Gentry Hall, University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65211**

**Phone: (573) 882-3243; FAX (573) 884-4878**

**E-mail: [pikel@missouri.edu](mailto:pikel@missouri.edu)**

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