



The write way

Putting pen to paper is a time-honoured way to gain clarity in your life, work through tough situations, heal from trauma and gain a deep sense of authenticity and purpose.

WORDS / ROSAMUND BURTON

"We often don't know what we think until we hear what we say, or see what we write," says Petrea King, CEO and director of the Quest for Life Foundation, which provides counselling courses and workshops for people living with cancer, AIDs, grief, depression and other traumas.

Petrea King recommends journal writing to Quest for Life course participants as a valuable way for them to explore the realms of their fears, hopes, expectations and dreams. "Rather than having to speak words," she says, "it can give you more time for reflection."

WRITING ON TRAUMA

For 12 years in her 20s and early 30s, King was a daily journal writer. "Writing out my inner world was a very useful process to unravel my own thinking and sort through some of the issues," she explains.

At the time she was experiencing a lot of emotional turmoil. Her brother had a mental illness and the journal writing was a means for her to understand and accept that, though on the one hand she loved him, she also found him very challenging and scary at times. When they were children he had told her he had to take his own life by the time he was 30, so from a young age she felt a personal responsibility to keep him sane.

"Given that I didn't think I had anyone I could talk to," says King, "journal writing was a really important avenue for me to express myself and a way of processing some of my thoughts and feelings around him and his illnesses, and the fears I had for him."

So often when you are going through an emotionally turbulent time, a lot of your feelings are enmeshed in each other. King believes writing is a really useful tool for separating out the issues. "When you've actually formalised your thinking through writing and been able to find the words that describe how you're feeling, then you can express those thoughts to loved ones. Having been able to articulate them to yourself by writing in the first place is a very important part of the process."

Dr James Pennebaker, chair of the Psychology Department of the University of Texas, US, is author of *Writing to Heal: A Guided Journal for Recovering From Trauma and Emotional Upheaval*. In his studies on this subject, he asks participants to write for 20 minutes every day for four days "about your deepest emotions and thoughts on the emotional upheaval that has been influencing your life the most".

Pennebaker's research has shown that this short-term, focused writing can have a beneficial effect on people dealing with illness, suffering trauma or making major transitions in their lives. Findings show that participants sleep better and have strengthened immune systems, decreased pain levels and lower blood pressure.

"People who engage in expressive writing report feeling happier and less negative than before writing. Similar reports of depressive symptoms, rumination and general anxiety tend to drop in the weeks and months after writing about emotional upheavals," he says in *Writing to Heal*.

Confessing or expressing trauma is an integral part of healing in many different cultures and writing about those secrets, even if what has been written is destroyed immediately afterwards, has a positive effect on health, he explains.

STARTING IN THE NOW

Author Stephanie Dowrick has taught thousands of people how to journal and has written a book about the process,

Creative Journal Writing. When you're sitting down, looking at a blank page, she advises, "The most crucial way of starting to write is right here and now, and is a kind of a mindfulness exercise. Where are you sitting? How do you feel? How is the air on your skin? Can you hear a cat purring in the next room?"

"If you start where you are, in a sense you start from solid ground and your mind will take you where you need to go. That's the essence of free association — of free writing — that you start where you are and then you follow where your mind wants to go. And that's how you make

discoveries that surprise you."

Petrea King also recommends describing your environment as a way of entering the process of writing. "By the time you've described the day and where you are, you've loosened up your hand and your mind before you begin the process of what you want to write about."

MORNING PAGES

The word "journal" comes from Old French, meaning "daily". Julia Cameron, author of *The Artist's Way*, has been writing "morning pages" every day for the past 25 years: three A4 pages written in longhand first thing every morning.

When asked to describe the concept of "morning pages", she says, "It is as though the writer has ADD. You skitter from

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topic to topic: 'The car had a funny knocking sound yesterday; I forgot to buy kitty litter; I didn't call my sister back.' It's like taking a whisk broom through your consciousness. You sort of whisk into all the corners and whisk up what's sitting there."

This daily commitment to writing three A4 sides about whatever pops into your mind, Cameron says, is "a spiritual practice. When you are writing morning pages you are, in effect, building a spiritual radio kit. You are saying, 'This is what I like; this is what I don't like. This is what I want more of; this is what I want less of.' You are tapping out a message about what you want to the universe. And as we are specific in our morning pages, we start to receive specific guidance back."

Cameron first advocated morning pages in *The Artist's Way*, first published in 1992. Twenty years later, her book has become a classic and millions of copies have been sold all around the world. It lays out a 12-week program for unblocking creativity and was written for artists of different mediums. The two main tools it promotes are the daily writing of morning pages and a weekly solo artist's date in which you spend two hours alone doing something that replenishes the creative well and feeds the soul.

What Cameron didn't realise at the time she first wrote the book was that the morning pages were going to prove an invaluable tool for people experiencing many different crises. She met people who were going through divorces, suffering from serious health issues, or looking after partners who were ill, and time and time again they would tell her, "The morning pages saved my life."

Writing three pages first thing in the morning tends to help people clarify, prioritise and synchronise the day ahead. The regular writing of morning pages also helps people to become conscious of patterns which were previously unconscious. "Because what you are trying to do is sort out what's important, morning pages are like a tough-love friend," explains the author. "If you raise an issue and then you drop it, and it's important, the pages will bring the issue up again."

Sometimes if you are writing about an issue that is emotionally charged you'll want to write more than three pages, but Cameron's adamant that three pages daily is enough. More, she claims, makes you a narcissist. *The Artist's Way* course, she says, is built on action. "Morning pages give you just enough to move forward and not so much that you become mired in your own stuff."

THE INTENSIVE JOURNAL

American psychologist Dr Ira Progoff (1921–1998), like Julia Cameron, was also interested in the lives of creative people. But his question was what makes people creative? What he found in common in the lives of creative people was something he called "active unfoldment": a deeper-than-consciousness part of the self that enabled them to create.

Wanting to make this process accessible to others, he developed the Intensive Journal method.

Progoff was aware that, although many people found keeping diaries and journals extremely beneficial, they would also often find themselves repeating the



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same patterns and writing about the same frustrations, explains Sydney-based Kate Scholl, who has been teaching the Intensive Journal method for more than 30 years.

"Progoff's method takes us out of that cycle and continues the growth outward into new levels of awareness," says Scholl. "We discover a dynamic at work, a thread connecting all the various parts of our life, which may have previously felt dichotomised and disconnected."

Essentially, the method uncovers the richness and beauty of the individual's life story. It is also an effective tool for problem-solving and prioritising, as well as healing old wounds and unhealthy relationships.

How it works is that you use an Intensive Journal workbook, a ring-binder folder divided into sections. In the log sections you briefly record your inner and outer experiences and, using feedback exercises, you transform the raw material using a lot of different writing techniques.

Progoff believed that this process revealed the seed potential of a person. It is a method that reveals your authenticity, which can get covered up really quickly, so that the truth of who you are becomes harder and harder to find. It's about getting into the river flow of your life and ultimately achieving self-acceptance.

It is an incredibly powerful way for people to put their lives into perspective and find a deeper meaning to them. Anthropologist and mythologist Joseph Campbell described Progoff's Intensive Journal process as "one of the greatest inventions of our time".

HOW, WHEN & HOW OFTEN?

What is the best way to approach the physical act of writing a journal? Both Stephanie Dowrick and Julia Cameron emphasise the importance of writing by hand rather than using a keyboard.

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According to Dowrick, our association with the computer is very left-brain-based and also often very worked-based. "There is something physical and sensual about handwriting," she explains. "It brings us into the world of the senses." Cameron can see the attraction of writing morning pages on the computer because it's so much faster, but she believes that writing morning pages by hand connects you to your emotions.

Cameron describes morning pages as "a meditation that's good for Westerners. A lot of the time we have a hard time sitting still and meditating for 20 minutes, doing nothing. This is a chance to sit still and do something." When it comes to the timing of writing your three pages, she advocates writing them on a daily basis first thing in the morning.

On the other hand, Dowrick suggests that, rather than create another "must" or "should", you should be more flexible. "Write reasonably regularly and have a commitment to it, but don't feel you're writing because you ought to. Write because you want to understand something or capture the essence of this moment."

KEEP OR KINDLE?

Another question with journals is what to do with them. Petrea King emphasises the importance for her of knowing that her journal was private. If you are going through a turbulent time in your life and are writing a journal to support you, she stresses that it's very useful to know that your journal is completely private and doesn't have to be shared with anyone.

After writing daily for 12 years during a time of incredible personal pain, she finally burnt her journals. "I couldn't bear the thought of anyone seeing the anguish and pain I was in at that time. I was embarrassed that I was in such a terrible state of despair, and couldn't let anybody see that."

Julia Cameron has a storage locker full of the A4 books she has filled daily for the past quarter-century. She doesn't often reread them, just occasionally when she wants to trace back to when an idea first cropped up. When people express concerns that others will read their morning pages, she says, "I always tell them in their will they should say, 'Cremate the morning pages, but don't worry about the body.'"

Julia Cameron, James Pennebaker, Petrea King, Stephanie Dowrick and Ira Progoff all offer different styles, methods and routines for writing. What is common to all of them is their deep understanding of how, by putting pen to paper, by using writing to strengthen your sense of self, you can make a commitment to nurture yourself and to move through the traumas life throws at you. 🍷

WANT TO KNOW MORE?

- For more information about Petrea King and the Quest for Life Foundation, go to questforlife.com.au.
- To find out more on Julia Cameron and The Artist's Way, including the video course, head online to juliacameronlive.com.
- Visit stephaniedowrick.com for information on Stephanie Dowrick and her journal writing work.
- Go to intensivejournal.org or eremos.org.au for information on Intensive Journal writing workshops.

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