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## **FOREWORD**

For many of us growing up, our journal or diary was our closest friend. We wrote about our friendships, ideas, and even our first crush. In this resource for teachers, *Real Stuff That Matters: An Introduction to Journal Writing in Inclusive Settings*, VSA arts introduces the art of journal writing to students of all abilities.

Writing from personal experience, or journaling, is a valuable way to

## INTRODUCTION

There is a growing popularity of journal keeping, which provides an opportunity to expose students to creative ways of writing about how they are thinking and what they are experiencing. The key to successful journal writing is that ownership belongs to the person writing the journal and that a journal is a private space.

In this guide, the focus is on writing from personal experience. The lessons in this book are based on journaling, giving students the opportunity to expand their skills by writing about the topic they know best—theirself and their worlds.

When teaching journal writing, you will need to take a different approach than teaching other forms of writing. A unique feature of journal writing is the assurance to the students that the writing may be kept private—for their eyes only. This can be a powerful tool to unlock the written word for writing-phobic students. You will also notice that there are many places where students are invited to share. The teacher or leader will become adept at balancing these two needs.

Teaching *how* to write is omitted from this guide on purpose. Thoughts in a journal are seeds for writing—seedlings are fragile and require much care and attention, not criticism or revision. This guide focuses less on writing skills and more on developing expressive facility.

Teachers can certainly extend these writing experiences into work on editing, grammar, and spelling. This can be balanced with keeping the journaling experience personal and private, thus developing the writer's ability to use writing as a means of reflection, for decision making, and increasing self-awareness.

Because of the nature of journals, these lessons are principally geared toward older students. There are also suggestions for younger learners, so that teachers can initiate these students into the idea of keeping journals. And of course, teachers will think of many more extensions, adaptations, and learning links.

Students with different learning styles often find writing to be the most

You will find in the lessons three kinds of key points that are highlighted within boxes. **Links to Learning** highlights ways that the lesson's writing activities and extensions can tie into and enrich the core curriculum. **Let's Say That Again** emphasizes educational approaches that are vital to the success of the activity. **Lesson Learned** points to the insights gained into students' experiences, thought processes, and learning styles, which can come from the writing experience.

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Mimi White has worked as poet in residence in a variety of locales since 1982. She has taught in public schools, settings for individuals with disabilities, residential facilities for seniors and for people with mental health disabilities, and community sites including churches, temples, daycare, and hospice care facilities.

Deb Stuart is a teaching artist whose discipline is children's traditional music and folklore. She has worked with students across the United States, in Central and South America, and in Europe as a residency artist and teacher trainer. Her training has focused on the integration of music into the classroom with particular emphasis on meeting the needs of all learners through arts-based approaches. Stuart has been a roster artist for the New Hampshire State Council on the Arts for 24 years.

## **LESSON ONE: YOU'RE THE EXPERT!**

Too often journals are filled with entries of what's wrong, the "shoulds" and "could haves." So start with putting your best foot forward.

### **GOALS**

To catalogue the student's skills; to look beyond the obvious athletic and artistic skills and include skills such as "good older sister" or "great at keeping still"; to rediscover a part of the self that may be hidden

### **HOW TO BEGIN**

Using yourself as a model, list on the board all the things you are good at. Ask the students to help you. They will know all about your fine teaching skills and maybe something about your personality, such as you "tell great jokes," but you will need to fill out the list with other ways in which you are the expert. Try to be wide-ranging and inclusive. Noting the big and little, the common and uncommon skills will add depth to the picture of who you are.

### **INSTRUCTIONS**

Remind the students that their journals are for their eyes only. What they write will be shared only if they wish to share. Also point out that you wrote your skills in short phrases, not complete sentences. This quick way of writing encourages the student to write more.

Give these directions orally:

- Make a list of all the things you are good at.
- Write fast; remember to include all the small or overlooked skills you have.



When the students have finished this individual exercise, have them pair up and give them the second set of instructions:

- Share with a partner what skills you are most proud of. Try to comment on what surprised you about yourself and what you heard from your partner that surprised you.
- Choose one thing you do really well and enjoy doing. Tell your partner exactly how you do this, what you do first, second, third, next, as if you were giving a recipe or instructions.

### **ONE STEP FURTHER OR BACK**

Here are some more suggestions and questions to stimulate your students' writing. Spend extra time talking about your list. You might explore the difference between being a good sister and being a fast runner. Which one is more satisfying; which one takes more work? When we are an expert at something, it usually implies that we have been taught this skill, practiced this skill. During the discussion phase, talk about the people who have helped teach you this skill. Did your grandmother teach you how to knit? Did your older brother teach you how to ride a bike? And finally, include in this phase of the lesson what it means to practice, commit yourself to doing something well, and what skills seem to come easily to us. How does what we do affect others?

Drawing oneself as the expert at something is another way to show what we are good at. Ask the students to draw a portrait of themselves in action with crayons or pencils (something that won't bleed onto the next page) in their journals. These might be displayed for a week or so for the students to see their friends performing something they are good at.

Another way to share what we are good at is through drama or action. Ask the students to create skits showing how to be a big sister or how to put together a model airplane. They can collaborate in pairs, writing a little dialogue for a five-minute lesson that they then teach to the class.

## EXTENSIONS

doing well. Students can add these to their lists and chime in with



- Think about how you look and how you have imagined yourself. Write in your journal why you see yourself as a river or a skyscraper or a field of wildflowers. Also, write something about how you see yourself for real. Is one view more pleasing than the other? How close are these two points of view?

### **ONE STEP FURTHER OR BACK**

Before you draw, cut out the faces from the magazines, collecting noses in one pile, eyes in another, hair, and so on. Using these parts, have the students create collages of what they look like, adding whatever details they might like with their pencils and crayons. Alternatively, have students cut the faces in unusual ways and put them together in ways that surprise and delight. (Take a look at Picasso's work for inspiration.) Talk about the different features of the face and how everyone is unique and special.

Ask the students to imagine themselves as a landscape. Take them through a guided imagery lesson, asking the following questions: **"If**

## **INCLUDING ALL LEARNERS**

This lesson can be simplified for younger learners. Self-portraits that are reflective of their development

## **LESSON THREE: GROWING IN IMPROBABLE PLACES**

Mary Oliver is a wonderful poet whose journal, *Blue Estuaries*, inspired this lesson. She walks daily and writes in her journal about what she observes and experiences in her neighborhood.

### **GOALS**

To observe nature closely, over a period of time; to make a habit of walking daily; to find something growing in a surprising or improbable place; to sketch what is observed and date each entry recording also the time and weather; to see growth in nature as a metaphor for all growth

### **HOW TO BEGIN**

Start by asking students, "What grows?" The discussion may move from themselves, to trees, flowers

- Observe something *large* that is growing—trees, shrubs, etc. Again sketch, date, and locate.
- Write something surprising that is observed, such as a dead tree with one live branch or flowers growing in a puddle of water.
- Do this every day, if possible, or on a regular basis such as once a week or over a period of time. Try to go the same time every day, perhaps during recess or in the afternoon when the students need to stretch a bit. Maybe focus on



Create a class terrarium with materials found on the walks or gather materials prior to the walk, like glass figurines. Mirrors can be added to create a world inside the glass casing. Start with a class journal, recording changes that are observed, also noting surprises and

Again, students with learning disabilities or with limited language can benefit from the list making aspect of this lesson. These lists can be used for building vocabulary as well as for building reading and writing skills. As always, another person can serve as a scribe for a non-writer.

For students who are blind or have low vision, you will need to work with their vision consultant to structure the observation experience so that there is an appropriate tactile component. This experience is rich with possibilities for this kind of exploration. In this case, encourage using touch for all students in the group and work with words that describe the textures and shapes. A tactile approach will also work well for students with different learning styles.

Remember to make class walks appropriate for students who have walking disabilities or who use wheelchairs. It is important that they not trail behind or be excluded.

## LESSON FOUR: LISTEN TO MY WORLD!

People often make note of what they see in the world around them, but what they *hear* tells them a lot about where they live. In this lesson students pay close attention to these sounds and write about how these sounds affect their lives.

### GOALS

To learn how to listen closely; to pay attention to parts of your environment such as homes, schools, or neighborhoods; to discover how sounds can trigger memories

### HOW TO BEGIN

To prepare the students for listening, read a few poems to them from *Knock at a Star* or a storybook, such as *Night Noises* by Mem Fox, *The Winter Noisy Book* by Margaret Wise Brown, or *Too Much Noise* by Ann McGovern. The poem “Splinter” by Carl Sandburg is about the very small sound the cricket makes and it asks the listener to *really* listen:

#### **Splinter**

The voice of the last cricket  
across the first frost  
is one kind of good-bye.  
It is so thin, a splinter of singing.

(*Knock at a Star*, 68)

Not only is this a *thin* sound, but it’s the *last* sound of summer. Even this small poem suggests ideas for writing—sounds that trigger endings, like leaving or taking, or maybe deeper losses such as a friend moving away.

After reading aloud and discussing the story or the poem you have selected, ask the students to keep very still and listen to the sounds

around them. Wait a full minute before you ask them to share what they have heard. Perhaps they heard children laughing, a door closing, or chairs scraping against the floor. Try to elicit a variety of sounds heard both inside the building and those traveling in from outside the classroom.

## **INSTRUCTIONS**

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instance, students can explore what sounds can be made by tapping or rapping on their desks, walls, and windows. Making this experience available to all students will add an interesting dimension to the lesson. This can be an alternate way of observing for both the students with hearing loss and other students who choose to follow this route.

If the class includes a student who is Deaf and communicates by American Sign Language, it would be interesting to offer a visual alternative. What can one sign suggest and where might that concept take you in your imagination? What body language do you observe from speakers who are some distance from you? This is an interesting question for all students.

Using a digital or tape recorder (with guidelines about not taping others' conversations without permission) could be a good tool for students with learning disabilities. Listening to the sounds or short snatches of talk they have recorded, then talking about what they hear and how it makes them feel or what it can make them imagine, can then be transcribed.

*Narrative (from Mimi White): A sound from my childhood was the genesis of a poem. My mother's bureau ended up in my house when my parents' furniture was dispersed. The first time I opened my mother's drawer I heard the clink from the brass pulls and I was transported back to Newbury Street and the house I grew up in. This is the poem that the sound triggered:*

## **My Mother's Bureau**

The drawers slide to a close  
and the brass pull rings.

\*

My hair brushes my shoulders  
and my long arms make windmills.

My mother is in the kitchen  
stacking milk-glass bowls

into the maple cupboards.  
They clink, not like cowbells,

more musical—  
each sound a pebble sinking in a river.

\*

They slip past light  
to the water's bottom.

I wish my mother would turn  
her face toward mine. I'd like

one word to carry  
to the room's silence,

her voice from another place  
far away from mine.

Her back a landscape  
I sing myself to sleep in.

## **LESSON FIVE: THE STUFF YOU SAVE**

Everyone brings back mementos from visits with family and friends—bus tickets, movie ticket stubs, napkins, etc. The stuff you keep is the basis for this lesson: saving it, creating art from it, and then finally using it as inspiration for writing. Think of the collage of objects as an autobiography of your life, telling who you are by what you save.

### **GOALS**

To make art out of scraps or found objects; to know who you are by what you save; to let the writing be a natural extension of the visual art activity; to find a place to put all the junk you keep

### **HOW TO BEGIN**

It might be best to start with a general discussion about what people save. Ask the students, “Does anyone save anything?” All the hands should go up. If not, ask a couple of leading questions. Ask them to write for five minutes in their journals ALL the things they collect and have collected over the years. They could add where they store this stuff and why they keep it. After they have had a few minutes to make their lists, let them share with the whole class or a partner. They might be surprised to find that others hoard the same things. This is a good time for the teacher to share his or her list and to think about joining in on this activity.

### **INSTRUCTIONS**

- Start collecting stuff at home. You might need a box for bigger objects, but you can also slip small, slim things right into your journal. Remind the students that spelling tests or letters from parents and friends can be saved. Nothing is too small or strange for this lesson.
- After there is enough stuff to work with, maybe a couple of weeks, share what has been saved with the class. Talk about the “story”



behind the objects, where they came from, who gave them to you, and why you kept them.

- Make journal entries about three favorite objects, or ones that mean the most to you. Include where each object came from, who gave it to you, why you kept it, and how you would feel if you lost it. Draw a sketch to go with each object.
- Using the flat pieces (postcards, letters, photos, poems, ticket stubs, leaves, etc.), create a collage on heavy construction paper. Black might be a great background for light or colored objects. Arrange and rearrange before you secure the pieces with glue. Write a story, poem, or a few paragraphs about this collage. Let the specifics in the work of art be the inspiration. Name the object. For example, “This letter from my best friend Abby, who moved to Texas,” could be an opening phrase. Use all the details in the design in your writing. Title your collage either before or after writing. Sometimes the title helps start the writing.
- With the heavier and more sculptural objects such as stones or branches, try making a mobile or three-dimensional work of art. During World War II, Pablo Picasso walked around Paris with his son looking for objects with which to create his sculptures. With a war going on, there was very little being produced in the way of art supplies, so he worked with what was lost or thrown out, and then scavenged for his work. This time, write about the new creation. Such objects as a tire, a piece of metal, an old shirt, and stones may be transformed into a doll, a bed, or even a sculpture of the night sky. Title your sculpture and start writing. You might include what you were thinking about as your creation took shape, what surprised you, and what you’d like to do with it now that it has been made.

## **ONE STEP FURTHER OR**

inside them. Ask the art teacher or a local artist to demonstrate how to put things together in an unusual way. Modeling first will help the students work more independently later.

Name the collages and the sculptures and talk about why these titles work. This is good first step toward writing. Accept any form the writing takes, whether it is a poem, a story, or even a short piece of nonfiction.

## **EXTENSIONS**

Have an art show displaying students' collages of saved memorabilia. Get in touch with a local group that is focusing on sustainability or recycling. The student artwork could be sold with the proceeds going to local environmental programs. Perhaps the town hall or fire station would host the event. If students feel comfortable doing so, display their writing with their collages and sculptures. Leave a visitors' journal at a reception area where people can add their comments about the show. Encourage them to leave found objects for your students to use as they c

*around and telling what he had seen and done, using these as illustrations. Everybody observing was astonished at the outgoing, poised presentation—by a student who generally was silent and non-participatory. He even offered a question-and-answer period!*

**Lesson Learned**

Having actual meaningful “things” as touchstones for his trip freed Stuart to share and

## **LESSON SIX: WHO'S HOME?**

**scene that you think is beautiful.”** This will get the students thinking about themselves in relation to the photographs. Young students could bring in a baby picture and talk about the ways in which they have changed an

- After the photo shoot, ask the students to record in their journals why they took their particular pictures. Ask, **“Why was it important to you to have a record of that person or scene? What angle did you take it from? Straight on? To one side? Up close? What were you trying to do? Why is taking a picture different than making a sketch?”**
- Share the developed pictures. Compare what they were trying to do with how the picture came out. Find something in each photograph that was surprising, or maybe disappointing. See if the unexpected shot has more to tell than had been expected. Ask the students to refine their journal entries and expand upon what they see in their developed pictures.
- Tell the story of your life through photographs. First talk about the ways in which we tell our life stories—through family, first experiences, places we have lived—and ask the students to think about how they would like to tell their life stories, in maybe a unique way. Since my husband climbs mountains, he might choose to tell his story through photographs of the peaks he has climbed. Maybe a student might wish to tell his or her story through photographs of pets or close friends. This goes back to the beginning activity where the students needed to decide what they wanted to record of their school and their neighborhood. Taking a picture, or creating a story through photography, is a deliberate act. After the story is told in pictures, ask the students to write the story in their journals, giving it a title and going beyond the collection of images, if they wish.
- Work with photos that inspire. Ask the students to find any photograph that inspires them from any place they wish, such as magazines, books, art galleries, museums where postcards of art may be purchased, or the class photography box. Talk about what the word “inspire” means. Check the dictionary. This will help the students select something that they can write about with thoughtful attention. Allow the students ample time to talk about their selections, sharing them with other students. This might be a good time to share *Something Permanent* or another book that pairs photographs with writing. When all the pictures have been shared







## **LESSON SEVEN: WHAT HAVE YOU LOST?**

Poet Naomi Shihab Nye and photographer Michael Nye published a wonderful anthology of poems and photos titled *What Have You Lost?* The book's title brings to mind both memories of childhood and dreams for the future.

### **GOALS**

To honor what has been lost by writing about it; to continue exploring photography and writing; to honor through the act of remembering

### **HOW TO BEGIN**

Begin by asking the students, "What have you lost?" It could be a recent loss or one from several years back. Tell them they may include all sorts of things, from smallest of things to the most important, including teeth, pets, grandparents, old houses, keys—anything that is now gone. As they share their losses, write them on the board.

With older students, you may wi



- Sometimes we are afraid of losing things or people. Sometimes we have to move or fear that we might not be able to stay where we live. Sometimes it's a more general fear: we don't want to grow up, become a teenager, or we are afraid of losing a best friend. Write a journal entry about something you don't want to lose. You may wish to start with a general list, as you did in the last exercise, then focus in on one idea. You might add what you could do to overcome this fear. If you feel comfortable, share this entry with a friend.

### **ONE STEP FURTHER OR BACK**

Loss is painful. Be respectful of students who may not want to write about it. Keep the losses easy and light if need be—teeth, books... even losing one's way around the school or in a big store is frightening but less difficult to share than a death or a divorce in the family. Share small things you have lost with the students, including what you lost at their ages. This may make them feel more comfortable sharing their losses. Remind them that the journal is private and no one will read it without their permission.

Drawing a picture is also a good place to start, before beginning the writing—maybe the house or village they grew up in, an old dress that was loved, a field where the student played hide-and-seek. Also bringing in old photographs of grandparents or pets who may no longer be alive is a gentle way to share loss. It's also fun to look at yourself when you were younger and think about what is lost—that blonde hair, those chubby legs, the shyness, etc.

### **EXTENSIONS**

A book much like the one Nye assembled would also be a fine extension for this lesson. The students could select a journal entry and a piece of art to accompany it. Placing the book in the school or town library would help others with their losses and enlarge the community of people who have had this experience.

Usually loss needs to be shared with others who have experienced it. If family has not viewed the students' journals, this might be the time





## INSTRUCTIONS

These lessons try to approach the theme from several angles. You will need to decide on the best place for you and your students to begin. The following offers some different options.

- Draw a floor plan of your childhood home. Don't worry if you leave out some rooms, or if the plan is not "accurate." Your memory will tell you everything you need to know and draw. If you have room, do this in your journal; otherwise, a large sheet of white paper will work well too.
- Locate yourself in the home and draw yourself into the floor plan. Maybe you are looking out your bedroom window, or you are sitting on the stoop outside the front door.
- Share your plan with a partner, adding any details that you had left out. Explain why you located yourself where you did.
- Start writing in the present tense, as if you were actually in the spot you have placed yourself in your drawing. For example, "I am under the covers listening to the rain hit the roof," or "When I sit on the stoop, it's always to get away from the noise of my sisters and brothers!" Try to include all that you can see, hear, and smell. You might include what you are thinking or wishing, too.
- Draw a picture of your mother's or grandmother's kitchen. Use crayons if you'd like. Add something that was *never* there, such as a cat or a huge black stove—anything you can imagine! Make a list of all the things you have but did not draw, such as cow-shaped salt and pepper shakers, a plate of fried chicken on the kitchen table, a birthday cake with candles lit, your grandmother at the stove, etc. Also add to this list any foods that you recall loving. Write a story that takes place in the kitchen; maybe it will begin with a memory. See if you can find a place for the imagined detail. This story starts in a real place, but could end up in an imagined setting. Mixing what is real with what you can imagine adds energy to a piece of writing.
- In your mind, picture a view out of your window. What window do you like to look out? Is it the hall window, or the attic, or the view

onto the apartment building across the street? See yourself at this window. What can you see and/or hear out the window? Is it nighttime or daytime? What kind of weather is outside your window? When do you like to look out the window? If someone looked in your window, what would he or she see? Write a short poem or prose piece pretending you are looking out your window. Include how you feel as you sit there and what you are thinking about.

- Where do you feel most at home? Think of a space that is not your real home, but maybe still feels like home. Perhaps some place in nature like the sky, a tree, the beach, the local art museum, a park bench, or a large crowd. Create this place with stuff from the box of material that you used in the “Stuff” lesson. Combine these materials to make a collage or a diorama. You could also paint a picture of this place. Then write why this spot feels like home to you.
- Where will your home be 20 years from now? Imagine this place and draw a picture of it using any materials you like—paint, crayons, pencils, fabric, twigs, stone—anything! Write about who you’ll be 20 years from now and why this is your home of the future. How is this home different from the one you live in now? What makes you feel at home in this new place?

### **ONE STEP FURTHER OR BACK**

After the discussion about home, pass out drawing paper and ask the students to draw something that has the spirit of home, but does not look like a house or an apartment. It could be a design, or an abstract representation that gives the sense of being at home. Also talk about colors. Would home be colored in reds or light blues, or in blacks and whites? This might be the right time to ask where in nature, or in the world at large, they feel at home and ask them to draw that place. Some people would draw the mountains and others would draw a busy intersection in New York City. Share these pictures as a class. Then ask the students to each draw a picture of their real homes or to take photographs of them. Display each student’s first drawing alongside the second and compare the two, and talk about how the real picture differs from the imagined, while finding common elements

as well. Then ask the students to write a journal entry where these thoughts are explored.

Younger students will enjoy learning about animal houses. Science texts and children's books are a good place to begin. *Henry Builds a Cabin* is a new children's book that retells the story of Henry David Thoreau's life in the Walden woods through the eyes of a bear. It focuses on the early spring and summer days when Thoreau was building his cabin. If it's spring, you might go on a nature walk in search of nests. Maybe there is a beaver pond and home in your neighborhood. Talk about the shapes and materials these are made out of. Think about why the animals live where they do and ask the students to relate this to where they live. You can also expand this idea to other cultures, present and past. Look at homes such as caves, igloos, teepees, and why these homes suit the people who live in them. Why do yours suit you?







paste them into your journal. Then write something using some of your favorites.

- Try word collages. As a class, brainstorm favorite words, words that you like to say, such as “zipper” or “plunk”; words that are long and fill up your mouth, like “macaroni.” Try listing all of your favorite color words, or your favorite place words. Any theme will work: weather words, friends’ nam

**the argument? Where do they live? Are they just passing through town?** Write down some of the dialogue in your journal

I

third session he was writing entirely in sentences of a sort. Interestingly, he wrote about himself and what was happening around him. And he thought it was fun! Very early on, when the five minutes were up, he'd say, "I need a little more time to finish." His first phrases were simply about what was happening in his life—sitting in the kitchen with Dad, going riding, skiing. Then he moved on to things he *wished* were true, like owning a horse.

After about two weeks he learned to spell-check his writing and to look at content. Three months later he was writing at a third-grade level with confidence and pleasure. This project marked his growth, in six months, from a first-grade writing level to being a functioning writer. It was a turning point where he left behind forever the "but I can't write" fears. In addition, his reading level at the end of this time went from early second to end of fourth grade. This was certainly due to the strategies involved specifically in reading skills, but clearly reflected his discovery that writing and words could be meaningful and satisfying. He rejoined his class in school able to work much closer to grade level and remained with them through middle and high school.

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(Set in Harlem of the 1960s, this story focuses on a 14-year-old girl who shares her life through poems and journal entries; fiction.)

Johnson, D.B. *Henry Builds A Cabin*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2002.  
(Gives a view of Henry David Thoreau's house at Waldon Pond, looked at through the eyes of a bear.)

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