

# A Learning Journal

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"Journal" comes from the French word for *day*, as in *soup de jour*. We also call it a "diary," from the Latin word for *day*. It usually means jotting down your thoughts every day.

We don't write down all our thoughts—only certain kinds. Some people record mainly their activities, some explore their feelings, some think through problems by writing, some talk to God, some write to a deceased loved one. But what have you there? Just a list of events, thoughts, and feelings.

But a journal may also be used to guide your learning each day. For *guided* learning, one textbook suggests a "Discovery and Intention" Journal.<sup>1</sup> I recommend you try it. During the several weeks of a course, record the discoveries you made and what you intend to do about them. So each journal entry should have two separate parts: **Discovery** and **Intention**. In each part, be sure to limit your remarks to what the Discovery & Intention method requires and not go too far afield. This restriction can be very helpful in focusing your mind what do to with your discoveries.

**Discovery** statements may be about

- **Course material.** New facts. New insights into facts. Good resources. How this information can be applied.
- **Yourself.** Insights or clues about how you learn best—or worst! How you feel about school today.
- **Others.** Things you "learned" about other people at work or at home. Insights into political issues, moral issues.
- **Questions.** New questions that occurred to you about course material, or yourself, or others. What new information puzzles you. (Notice that discovering what puzzles you or formulating a good question is a true advance in learning!)

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<sup>1</sup> Ellis, Dave, *Becoming a Master Student* (New York: Houghton Mifflin, 2003), pp. 10-13.

A discovery statement actually states *what* you discovered. This ensures that when you review your journal entry later, you'll know exactly what happened to you. For example, "I discovered many things about myself" or "I discovered that I had a mistaken view about writing" states *that* you discovered something but not *what* you discovered. It will be more valuable to you later to have written, "I discovered that I can actually learn economics" or "I discovered that trying to write clearly makes me think clearly."



Often, your discovery is not an *addition* to your views but a *replacement*. That is, you realize that you were thinking about something in an entirely wrong way. If so, be sure to record the view you intend to replace. It can help prevent slipping back into old assumptions.

Be careful to keep these as discoveries, and not as assessments. That is, don't start blaming yourself, or anyone else. Don't whine. If you discovered that you felt resentment, or anger, or frustration, just state that as a fact. (It's always a good idea to treat your feelings as facts first to be understood rather than dictators rushing you into thoughtless action.) Perhaps record a question about why you had these feelings at that time.

**Intention** statements should be

- **Based on your discovery.**
- **An Accomplishment.** Not what you just hope to accomplish, but what you seriously intend to accomplish. Use "I will ..." rather than "I will try to . . . ."
- **Short Term.** Not some long range objective but something actually you intend to do within the next few weeks or so. So a target date or time frame is needed.
- **Verifiable.** The accomplishment should be observable or measurable. You should be able to tell when you have accomplished it.

Notice how this practice forces you to use your discoveries as springboards to some action in the near future. It is simply a good learning habit to cultivate.

If your discovery leads to a rather long-range intention, break it down into smaller, manageable steps—things you can do in the next few weeks.

For example, if your *discovery* leads you to want to be present to your family more often, then an *intention* might be, "I will not be the first person to leave the dinner table this week." Or if your *discovery* leads you to want to develop better study habits, your *intention* might be, "Next Tuesday, I will tell my family that I need to be left alone for an hour for study."

If you don't accomplish what you intended, don't beat yourself up. Rather, ask yourself why you fell short. You can always make a new discovery statement about this.

By using this Discovery & Intention method of journaling, by the end of the course you will have a record of all kinds of discoveries—about planning, memorizing, reading, note-taking, test-taking, communicating, and how it all fits into your growth as an intelligent, responsible person. You will also have descriptions of the specific steps you accomplished along the way.

## Samples

Here are examples of Discovery & Intention journal entries:

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**Discovery.** In Lecture 1A, the distinction between being knowledgeable and being intelligent really helped me understand why I found school so difficult. I was confused about the difference myself and, I'm now convinced, most of my teachers were too!

**Intention.** Tomorrow, I will pay attention to how my coworkers think—whether more knowledgeable or more intelligent. I don't mean to judge them, nor will I say anything to them. I just want to get in the habit of thinking in these terms.

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**Discovery:** I have discovered this week that I need to learn to write more clearly. In the discussion, other students wrote a lot more clearly than I do. My sentence structure can use a little work and my vocabulary could use some expanding.

**Intention:** This coming Saturday, I will review the "Course Guidelines" again, especially the "Clear Writing" and the "Academic Writing" sections. Then I will "edit" a paper I turned in to the Business Ethics course last year to see where I could have been clearer.

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## *Memoirs*

Because these journal entries are made often during a week, the record of your discoveries and intentions will be somewhat haphazard. But besides writing a journal, some people also write a memoir. While journals have little organization, memoirs are organized reflections on what was going on over long periods. So journals are the database for memoirs, where you organize your thoughts and experiences under certain headings. This kind of writing will surprise you as you gain, *not new experiences*, but new *insights* into your experiences. You gain an understanding of things going forward in your life that you were unaware of at the time. You see connections. You see a pattern of progress over a longer period; or perhaps a pattern of decline. You organize your thoughts under main headings such as "The Blooming of Poetry in My Life," or "Finally Forgiving Mom."

So I also recommend that you consider writing a memoir based on your journal. You could maintain this Discovery & Intention journal until your final course before graduation. This would be an excellent time to review your Discovery & Intention journals for insight into what was changing in your life during this time.