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The Surprising Benefits of Journaling One Sentence Every Day

From 1986 to 2011, Oprah Winfrey hosted *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. It was the highest rated talk show of all-time and familiar to nearly anyone who owned a television set in North America at that time.

Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the “Queen of All Media” built a brand that stretched far beyond the television screen. She went on to become a billionaire, a well-regarded philanthropist, and a recipient of the Presidential Medal of Freedom. And as she was busy working toward these otherworldly accomplishments, Oprah relied on a simple habit: journaling.

Journaling is simply the act of thinking about your life and writing it down. That’s it. Nothing more is needed. But despite its simplicity, the daily journal has played a key role in the careers of many prolific people.

As you might expect, journaling is a favorite habit of many writers. From Mark Twain to Virginia Woolf, Francis Bacon to Joan Didion, John Cheever to Vladimir Nabokov. A journal was rarely far from any of these artists. Susan Sontag once

claimed that her journal was where she “created herself.”

Journaling has been utilized by scores of brilliant thinkers and inventors. Charles Darwin. Marie Curie. Leonardo da Vinci. Thomas Edison. Albert Einstein. Similarly, leaders and politicians throughout history have kept journals in one form or another. People like George Washington, Winston Churchill, and Marcus Aurelius. In the sporting world, athletes like Katie Ledecky, winner of multiple gold medals, and Eliud Kipchoge, the world record holder in the marathon, rely on journals to reflect on their daily workouts and improve their training.

Why have so many of history's greatest thinkers spent time journaling? What are the benefits?

What Journaling Can Do for You

Nearly anyone can benefit from getting their thoughts out of their head and onto paper. There are more benefits to journaling than I have time to cover here, but allow me to point out a few of my favorites.

Journaling provides the opportunity to learn new lessons from old experiences. When looking back on her previous journal entries, Virginia Woolf remarked that she often “found the significance to lie where I never saw it at the time.”

Reading your old journal entries is a bit like reading a great book for a second time. You pick up on new sentences and see the past in a different way. Only this time, you are re-reading the story of your life.

Journaling sharpens your memory. When Cheryl Strayed wrote her hit book, *Wild*, she relied heavily on her journal. She recalled, “My journal provided the who, what, how, when, and why with a specificity that memory might have blurred, but it also did something more: it offered me a frank and unvarnished portrait of myself at 26 that I couldn't have found anywhere else.”

Time will change your face without you noticing, but it will also change your thoughts without you realizing it. Our beliefs shift slowly as we gain experience and journal entries have the ability to freeze your thoughts in time. Seeing an old picture of yourself can be interesting because it reminds you of what you looked like, but reading an old journal entry can be even more surprising because it reminds you of how you thought.

Journaling motivates you to make the most of each day. There is something about knowing that your day will be recorded that makes you want to make at least one good choice before the sun sets. I will sometimes find myself thinking, “I want to have something good to write down tonight.”

Journaling provides proof of your progress. Writing down one sentence about what went well today gives you something powerful to look at when you're feeling down. When you have a bad day, it can be easy to forget how much progress you have made. But with a journal, it's easier to keep a sense of perspective. One glance at your previous entries and you have proof of how much you have grown over the months and years.

Of course, despite the numerous benefits of journaling, there is one problem.

Many people like the *idea* of journaling, but few people stick with the *act* of

journaling. It sounds great in theory, but making it a habit is another matter.

This is where we return to Oprah's story.

The Challenge of Making Journaling a Habit

In November 2012, after wrapping up her 25-year television career, Oprah wrote, “For years I've been advocating the power and pleasure of being grateful. I kept a gratitude journal for a full decade without fail—and urged you all to do the same. Then life got busy. My schedule overwhelmed me. I still opened my journal some nights, but my ritual of writing down five things I was grateful for every day started slipping away.”

She picked up one of her old journals.

“I wondered why I no longer felt the joy of simple moments,” Oprah said. “Since 1996 I had accumulated more wealth, more responsibility, more possessions; everything, it seemed, had grown exponentially—except my happiness. How had I, with all my options and opportunities, become one of those people who never have time to feel delight? I was stretched in so many directions, I wasn't feeling much of anything. Too busy doing.”

She admitted, “But the truth is, I was busy in 1996, too. I just made gratitude a daily priority. I went through the day looking for things to be grateful for, and something always showed up.”

Most people know that journaling is helpful, but they never get around to making it a priority. How can we make journaling frictionless? What is the simplest way that to get the benefits of journaling without it feeling like another obligation?

How to Make Journaling Easy

I've spent a fair bit of time thinking about how to make journaling easy over the past year. In fact, I thought so much about it that I partnered with the premium notebook maker Baron Fig to create the Clear Habit Journal (<https://www.baronfig.com/products/clear-habit-journal>)—a combination dot grid notebook, daily journal, and habit tracker that not only makes it easier to journal, but also easier to build any habit.

But before I start hawking my wares, let's get something straight.

Here's the truth: There's no one “right” way to journal. You can do it wherever you want and in whatever way you want. All you need is a piece of paper or a blank document. However, although there is no right way to journal, there is an easy way to journal...

Write one sentence per day.

The primary advantage of journaling one sentence each day is that it makes journaling *fun*. It's easy to do. It's easy to feel successful. And if you feel good each time you finish journaling, then you'll keep coming back to it.

A habit does not have to be impressive for it to be useful.

Journaling Prompts That Make Journaling Easy

Let's talk about the process I designed to make journaling a cinch.

Every Habit Journal (<https://www.baronfig.com/products/clear-habit-journal>) is designed to make the process of keeping a daily journal as easy as possible. It starts with a section called One Line Per Day.

At the top of each One Line Per Day page is space for a journaling prompt. Here are a few examples of journaling prompts you could use:

- What happened today? (Daily journal)
- What am I grateful for today? (Gratitude journal)
- What is my most important task today? (Productivity journal)
- How did I sleep last night? (Sleep journal)
- How do I feel today? (Mood journal)

Underneath the prompt are 31 lines. One line for each day of the month. This is where you'll write your one sentence each day.

To start your journaling habit all you have to do is write your prompt for the month and jot down a few words each day. Once the month is complete, you can look back on 31 beautiful journal entries. The entire experience is designed to make journaling so easy that you can't help but do it each day.

That's it. You can see a picture of the One Line Per Day section on this page (<https://www.baronfig.com/products/clear-habit-journal>).

Where to Go From Here

When a habit feels like an annoyance, you're unlikely to stick with it.

Journaling doesn't need to be a big production. Just write one sentence about what happened during the day. Whether you use my habit journal (<https://www.baronfig.com/products/clear-habit-journal>) or not is beside the point.

What matters is that you make it easy to show up. As Madeleine L'Engle, author of *A Wrinkle in Time*, put it: "Just write a little bit every day."

FOOTNOTES

1. Sources: The Bancroft Library at the University of California has a website with digitized versions of many of Mark Twain's journals (<http://www.marktwainproject.org/homepage.html>); A Writer's Diary (<https://jamesclear.com/book/a-writers-diary>) is a collection of Virginia Woolf's journals; Some of Francis Bacon's journals (http://dla.library.upenn.edu/cocoon/dla/pacscl/ead.html?rows=100&fq=genre_form_facet%3A%22Quakers%20--%20Diaries%22&id=PACSCL_HAVERFORD_USPHCMC97501004&) are archived at the Haverford College Quaker & Special Collections at the University of Pennsylvania; Joan Didion detailed her journaling habit in her essay "On Keeping a Notebook" in her anthology *Slouching Towards Bethlehem* (<https://jamesclear.com/book/slouching-towards-bethlehem>); A selection of John Cheever's journals was published in *The Journals of John Cheever* (<https://jamesclear.com/book/the-journals-of-john-cheever>); *Insomniac Dreams* (<https://jamesclear.com/book/insomniac-dreams>) is Vladimir Nabokov's dream diary.
2. Technically, Sontag's quote was, "In the journal I do not just express myself more openly than I could to any person; I create myself." The quotation is from a diary entry published in Sontag's book *Reborn: Journals and Notebooks, 1947–1963* (<https://jamesclear.com/book/reborn>).
3. Sources: Portions of Charles Darwin's Beagle voyage diary (<http://www.galapagos.to/TEXTS/DIARY.HTM>); Marie Curie (<https://www.businessinsider.com/marie-curie-radioactive-papers-2015-8>) kept lab notebooks (they are still radioactive, and will be for another 1500 years); Portions of Leonardo da

(they are still radioactive, and will be for another 1500 years), portions of Leonardo da Vinci's notebooks (<https://www.bl.uk/collection-items/leonardo-da-vinci-notebook>) are held by the British Library and can be previewed online; Thomas Edison (<http://edison.rutgers.edu/index.htm>) wrote more than five million pages of notes; Get a peek into Albert Einstein's Zurich notebook (https://www.pitt.edu/~jdnorton/Goodies/Zurich_Notebook/)

4. Sources: George Washington's diaries (<https://www.loc.gov/loc/lcib/0010/gwdiary.html>) on the Library of Congress website; Winston Churchill's personal notes (<http://www.churchillarchive.com/>) are digitized in an online archive; Marcus Aurelius' Meditations (<https://jamesclear.com/book/meditations>) is a collection of his personal writings.
 5. Sources: Interview with Katie Ledecky's coach (<https://swimmingcoach.org/training-katie-ledecky-by-yuri-suguiyama-curl-burke-swim-club-2012/>); Eliud Kipchoge's full training log (<http://www.sweatelite.co/eliud-kipchoge-full-training-log-leading-marathon-world-record-attempt/>).
 6. A Writer's Diary (<https://jamesclear.com/book/a-writers-diary>) by Virginia Woolf.
 7. A Long Level Gaze (<https://www.powells.com/post/guests/a-long-level-gaze>) by Cheryl Strayed.
 8. Quotes in this section are from What Oprah Knows for Sure About Gratitude (<http://www.oprah.com/spirit/oprahs-gratitude-journal-oprah-on-gratitude#ixzz5YvTgEUgl>) by Oprah Winfrey.
 9. I also like a slight variation on this, which I learned from Shawn Blanc who uses “Highlight of the Day” as his prompt.
 10. Quotation from her biography, Madeleine L'Engle (<https://jamesclear.com/book/madeleine-lenge>) by Aaron Rosenberg.
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