

Journal Writing: The Incredible ESL Tool You'll Wish You'd Started Using Earlier

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“Awww, no, not yet!”

“Five more minutes!”

You have probably heard these words in class when it was time to end an exciting game, right?

But have your students ever been reluctant to stop when a writing activity came to an end?

By effectively integrating journal writing into your ESL classes, this can definitely happen!

Engaging journal writing will capture your students' thoughts, feelings and memories. Journals can be made personal yet fun, and the meaningful writing can make a true difference not only in yours students' English skills, but in their development into curious, respectful, analytical people.

If you follow the nine tips outlined below, your students will likely fall in love with the journal writing experience. They will probably continue with it way after they have finished your class—seriously!

Benefits of Journal Writing for ESL Students

Provides an effective platform for writing practice. When integrated regularly in your ESL lessons, journal writing can be a meaningful way for students to practice and improve the quality of their writing.

Allows the use of high order thinking skills. When you introduce journal writing in your ESL class, you encourage your students to think about past activities or events and evaluate them. They get to use adjectives and emotive words to express their feelings about past occurrences. But the benefit doesn't end there. Your students will also get to use high order thinking skills in analytical or hypothetical questions. This helps them to inculcate maturity in thought.

Serves as preparation for personal recount writing. Since personal recount is a text type that students need to be exposed to, why not jumpstart it with journal writing? This way, the transition to personal writing can be quite smooth when you get there.

Translates to a relationship builder. Journal writing can be an effective medium through which you can gain access to your students' deepest thoughts and feelings. Journal writing can be a non-threatening way for students to reveal their fears, joy and worries. In short, it is a fabulous way to get to know your students better so that you can work on their strengths and improve their weaknesses.

Follow through the tips below to help your students improve their writing skills through journal writing:

9 Tips to Make Journal Writing a Habit Your ESL Students Look Forward To

1. Consider multiple mediums

Journals can come in anything from a beautiful bound book consisting of lined or blank pages to loose sketch papers manually bound by a plastic spine.

To find which will be best for your students, first ask whether your students are able/willing to purchase their own journals. If not, is your school able to issue journals or sketch books to them?

The next best alternative is for students to write their entries on blank pieces of paper that can be manually compiled.

If you'd like to give your students the option of using online templates for their journals, the links below may provide you with some ideas:

- [Printable lined paper](#)
- [“What’s On Your Mind?” template](#)
- [Travel journal pages](#)

2. Encourage students to add a personal touch

You can instill a sense of ownership by getting students to decorate their journal covers, add photos and paste pictures. Adding a personal touch will be a first step to encourage your students to write.

You can instill creativity in entries by letting your students include sketches and illustrations alongside their writing.

For students who love to doodle, urge them to draw using all forms of medium—pencil, charcoal, colored pencils—to complement their journal entries. Students will surely be motivated to write because they are allowed to imprint their feelings and imagination by way of drawing.

Have a look at these beautiful samples to ignite your imagination:

Letting students browse Pinterest in English is another great activity to get them excited for journal writing.

3. Make housekeeping matters a priority

You will have to consider when students will bring and submit the journals, when you will return them and how to execute the topics before getting students started with the writing process.

I recommend getting your students to bring their journals to school on a daily basis, but of course it will all depend on your class schedule. Whether you decide to assign topics on a weekly or a daily basis, stick to it.

Weekly journal writing allows more capable students to proceed on to subsequent topics without waiting for the next one to be announced. On the other hand, making journal writing a daily affair is ideal for getting into the momentum. If the majority of students in your class

need support, giving them daily topics will be easier to monitor. You could always gradually reduce the sessions to two or three times a week in class, and expect two additional topics to be done outside of class.

There is no one-size-fits-all procedure, so try out some different options and adjust as you go along until you begin to see an effective formula. We will dive into a few of these housekeeping matters more in depth in the following tips, but just make sure to get a plan in place.

4. Allocate a reasonable amount of in-class writing time

I always give my students class time to write their journal entries, and if they can't complete the entries they are allowed to take them home. This also gives students time to decorate their entries at home, while working on the bulk of the writing in class.

But how long should you allow your students to write in their journals? The rule of thumb is to allow somewhere in between 10 to 30 minutes. With that in mind, 20 minutes is a great amount of time for your first session.

If students tend to get restless and lose interest by the end of the lesson, you will want to slot in journal writing at the beginning of the lesson when their concentration level is high.

If your class is productive and fixed in temperament, perhaps incorporating journal writing sessions at the end of the lesson as a winding down phase will be a good idea. This helps students to explore their creativity and express freely through writing and illustration.

Allocating suitable topics for the class as homework is beneficial in two ways: (1) It provides a continuum for students to practice writing in a habit-forming way and (2) students get to write about personal topics in a space outside the classroom without time constraints.

5. Give a variety of prompts from different categories

Ideally, it is recommended that you introduce prompts category by category, in order of difficulty. In general, the four categories I will introduce are ordered from easiest to most difficult as follows:

- Descriptive
- Imaginative
- Reflective
- Analytical

Once students have been introduced to all the categories and have had practice writing on each one, you can mix them up to add variety in subsequent journal writing sessions.

Here are some example topics to get you familiar with each type of entry:

Descriptive

- Describe how you spent the last weekend.
- Describe your favorite place in the house.
- Describe an unforgettable holiday.

Imaginative

- If you were a superhero, what kind of power would you like to have and why?
- Imagine that you have been chosen to live on Mars for a few years. What would you build there and why?
- What animal would you like to be and why?

Reflective

- What is the most valuable thing you have learned in the past few months and how has it helped you grow?
- Write about the friends you have made since you joined the school and explain the importance of friendship.
- Think about one thing you would most like to have and explain the reasons why.

Analytical

- What do you think is the cause of the problems between the rich and the poor today?
- Can climate change be reversed?
- How can we reduce child exploitation in third-world countries?

For beginners and pre-intermediate classes, it is best to concentrate on the descriptive and imaginative prompts. If you are hungry for more ideas, [look to the Internet for an exhaustive list of prompts.](#)

6. Create an interesting writing mood

By controlling the writing environment, you can change the mood to make writing an inviting and fun activity. Here are a few ways you can do this:

Use music. Get to know the kind of music your students listen to. Play easy listening pop music in the background to stimulate creativity and arouse students' interest. Albums that work well for this include Michael Buble's "To Be Loved" and Adele's "25."

Display visuals. Provide images in the form of pictures, clip art and photos related to the topic at hand. These not only give students stimulus for writing, but also inject some fun and color to the activity.

Encourage imagination. Think outside the box and encourage students to be imaginative. Let's say you'd like students to write about three things they would need the most if they were stranded on an island and to explain why. You could begin narrating your scenario like:

“Imagine you are on a plane, flying 15,000 feet above the ground. Suddenly, it jerks. You remain calm as you think it may be air turbulence in the sky. Then...the plane begins to shake again. This time, it is even stronger. You would have been thrown off your seat if not for your seat belt. You see smoke coming out of the plane's tail. You hear warning signs in your head. You ask yourself, “What if the plane crashed?” You look out the window and see a nearby island. If you were to survive a plane crash, think about three important things you would take out of the plane...”

If narrated with animation and a tone of suspense, you will be able to successfully capture your students' attention and get them interested to write.

Play sound effects. Collect a list of sounds and burn them on a CD or play relevant sounds from [Soundbible](#). This will come in handy as stimuli to trigger students' imaginations. Play the soothing sounds of waves and the cawing sounds of seagulls when getting students to write about a day at the beach. [The sounds of thunder and rain](#) will have a calming effect no matter what they are writing about!

7. Stick to a consistent feedback format

If the aim of introducing journal writing is to produce positive outcomes, you should consider putting a systemic marking strategy in place.

Consider using a combination of the following methods:

Selective grading using code markers

Below are abbreviations of parts of speech you can use when grading your students' entries. ([Here are a few more.](#))

T – tense

V – verb

SV – subject verb agreement

Prep – preposition

P – punctuation

WO – word order

WW – wrong word

In selective grading, you can select one or two areas to look out for in each entry, such as tenses and punctuation. The idea is to read the content, paying particular attention to the selected areas. That way, it does not become another writing exercise where you need to correct each and every mistake. You can choose to switch areas of focus each time you grade an entry.

Inform your students about the selective grading process so that they know not all the errors are marked and what each abbreviations stands for. This is an effective grading process, as it enables you to identify students' weak areas, work on them in class and chart their progress.

Prompt using questions

Another method of giving feedback is to write questions in the margins for students to reflect on and expand their ideas.

Examples are as follows:

- *Would you return to this place in the future?*
- *What makes cooking so relaxing?*
- *How can you be a better friend?*

Make an effort to ask a variety of open-ended questions: what, how, why. Encourage your students to answer these questions in subsequent entries.

Commenting on strengths and areas for improvement

At the end of each journal entry, you could choose to write comments on the overall content, use of language and ideas expressed. Bear in mind to start with a positive comment and then comment on an area for improvement.

Try to evoke an enthusiastic and encouraging tone as much as possible, while maintaining honesty at the same time.

To ensure that students look through all the graded entries, get them to answer prompts you have written. Acknowledge your students' attempts at improving their entries by adding your initials once you have read them.

8. Sustain students' interest by giving timely feedback

Now that you have some options for types of feedback, decide how often you will give feedback. I recommend either daily or weekly, depending on how often students are writing, as anything less frequent will be less effective.

Daily basis. Immediate feedback is the ideal method of getting back to your students if you see them every day. The entries are fresh in their minds. Students can take necessary measures to look through their mistakes and make the additions to their content as part of their improvement strategy.

Weekly basis. This is an alternative to the immediate feedback arrangement. Here, students submit one entry or a set of entries on a weekly basis. This works well if you don't see your students daily. However, it would then be more time consuming for you, as you could have five entries per student instead of one. It could also then feel overwhelming for students to be faced with the onerous task of responding to your comments on multiple entries at once.

Use your discretion and trial out each method to see what works best for your class.

9. Help students create compelling entries

The next stage of journal writing is getting students to elaborate on ideas so the entries sound appealing. To teach students to add color to their writing, consider the following tips:

Color code. Highlight nouns in red, for example, where adjectives could have been included, and highlight verbs in blue where adverbs could have been included. Make this known to students and stick to the same colors for the same parts of speech. Encourage students to write adjectives/adverbs above the color upon receiving their graded entries, so that they are more mindful of this next time.

Write questions for students to reflect on and answer. Include when, where, what, how, why and who questions for students to consider, as mentioned in #7. You can choose to ask a mixture of closed- or open-ended questions as the intent is simply to get your students to add color to their writing.

Encourage students to look at an idea from various angles. This will be suitable for more mature and advanced level students. For example, if your students are asked to write about their feelings on happiness, you can teach them to think of the topic from different points of view—that of a student's, working adult or a parent, or those in various living conditions and cultural backgrounds.

Remind students to include sensory details. Sensory details include the senses of hearing, tasting, sight, sound and touch. If writing about the beach, encourage your students to add details about the water, sand, people, etc. Get them to use many adjectives to describe common nouns.

“The soft, powdery sand feels light under my feet.”

“I could hear the excited voices of children playing happily in the calm water.”

Journal writing is a tried and proven method to help students improve their writing in the long run. As you can see, it is a supplementary exercise to encourage ESL students to write without the fear of making mistakes.

The trick is to use novel methods to encourage students to write. By incorporating art, music and drama into journal writing, you can surely win your students over.

Explore different ways of making journal writing fun. Incorporate your students' interests and use their strengths for journal writing to be a win-win for both you and your students. So what are you waiting for? Get on with it!

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