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Come in...and be captivated...

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### Writers' Craft Box

What this section is intended to do:  
Give writers suggested hints, resources, and advice.

How to use: Pick and choose what you feel is most helpful and derive inspiration from it- most importantly, **HAVE FUN!**

What a Writers' Craft Box is: Say you're doing an art project and you want to spice it up a bit. You reach into a seemingly bottomless box full of colorful art/craft supplies and choose only the things that speak to you. You take only what you need to feel that you've fully expressed yourself. Then, you go about doing your individual project adding just the right amount of everything you've chosen until you reach a product that suits you completely. So, this is on that concept. Reach in, find the things that inspire you, use the tools



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that get your writing going and see it as fulfilling your self-expression as opposed to following rules.

Writing is art and art is supposed to be fun, relaxing, healing and nurturing. It's all work and it's all play at the same time. A Writers' Craft Box is whatever your imagination needs it to be- a lifeboat, the spark of an idea, a strike of metaphorical lightning, a reminder, or simply the recommendation of a good book. Feel free to sit back and break out the crayons. Coloring outside the lines is heartily encouraged.

Author, editor, ghostwriter, writing coach, and spiritual counselor, Noelle Sterne has published over 250 published fiction and nonfiction pieces in print and online venues. She contributes to many guest blogs and writes a monthly column in *Coffeeshouse for Writers*, "Bloom Where You're Writing." With a Ph.D. from Columbia University, for over 28 years Noelle has guided doctoral candidates to completion of their dissertations. Based on this work, her latest project-in-progress is a practical-psychological-spiritual handbook, *Grad U: Complete Your Dissertation—Finally—and Ease the Trip for Yourself and Everyone Who Has to Live With You*. In her current book, *Trust Your Life: Forgive Yourself and Go After Your Dreams* (Unity Books), Noelle draws examples from her practice and other aspects of life to help writers and others release regrets, relabel their past, and reach their lifelong yearnings. Visit Noelle at [www.trustyourlifenow.com](http://www.trustyourlifenow.com)

Use Your Journal to Banish Blocks and Coax Creativity

by Noelle Sterne

Over mugs of herb tea at our favorite café, my friend Anna slumped in her chair. “What am I going to do!”

A travel writer, Anna got her first substantial assignment a few months ago from a prestigious inflight magazine. When she told me, we screamed, laughed, and jumped up and down. Then she tore into the assignment, gathering preliminary materials for the trip funded and scheduled by the magazine.

Two weeks later, I got an excited card postmarked from the island she was covering. When she returned, my answering machine announced regular progress bulletins: “Did lead-in today... starting historical background...already know perfect ending...interviewed oldest man on island...”

Until she called. “Emergency! Must see you!”

So here we sat in the café, Anna twisting her cup and staring at me with heavy lids. “Everything was going great. And then it hit—the Block. How am I gonna get out of this? The deadline’s only two weeks away. It’s too important for my career, and I can’t blow it!”

I understood. We all bump up against writing obstructions of different sizes, from pebbles to boulders. They weren’t new to Anna either, but before, sooner or later she’d always kicked them out of the way and continued peddling to the finish. This block, though, sat smack in the middle of her writing road and she couldn’t budge it or steer around it.

I asked Anna why she thought the block had reared up at this moment. She slapped her hand on the table. “How should I know! If I did, I’d be home writing!”

Her words sparked an idea. “Anna,” I asked, “do you keep a journal?”

“What?” The question pierced her angry frustration. “Oh,” she waved her hand, “I used to. No time now. I’ve got enough to do.”

I said gently, “Try it. It might be just what you need to break this thing.”

“Humpff.” She took a gulp of tea. “What’s the point? If I’m gonna write, I

should be doing the article.”

“That’s exactly it,” I pressed on. “You need to start writing, about anything. How you feel about not writing, the article, the laundry still piled up from your trip, your unopened mail—anything.”

Anna said nothing but, to my surprise, pulled out the notebook that lived in her handbag. She took another swig of tea and started scribbling.

I’m pleased to report that Anna kept writing for about fifteen minutes. I sat silent, supporting her with my approving presence.

Anna’s experience illustrates one of the major uses of journaling. Writing teachers often advise journal writing, and many veteran writers faithfully keep them for years. Whenever I browse in published journals of well-known authors, I’m fascinated and heartened to see the seeds of some of their most famous and successful works.

I’ve kept journals off and on most of my life, sometimes daily and sometimes for special occasions, like when my therapist abandoned me every August for her vacation. My journal has sustained me through the sweep of life’s events, from the smallest to the most soul-shaking. It’s been the receptacle for catharses, complaints, reminiscences, rages, and not a few dazzling writing concepts.

When Anna’s journaling finally rolled away the huge stone that blocked her, she became convinced of its value. After she sent off her finished travel piece, we talked about how the journal had helped her. We also asked other writers about their experiences with journaling, and what writers can do to keep their journals and writing flowing. The following list that evolved will help you especially if you’ve wanted to start your journal, have recently begun, or need a tender prod to stick to it.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Set Up Your Journal

1. **Write by hand.** I know, I know, you always use the computer. But God built into us a mysterious link from arm-to-wrist-to-fingers-holding-pen. Many have recognized this connection, as writing mentor Natalie Goldberg describes in her classic *Writing Down the Bones*:

*Writing is physical and is affected by the equipment you use. In typing, your fingers hit keys and the result is block, black letters. Handwriting is more connected to the movement of the heart... You are physically engaged with the pen, and your hand, connected to your arm, is pouring out the record of your senses. [1]*

**2. Choose the paper that pleases you.** This is a way of honoring yourself, which, after all, is an essential part of your journal. You may love a crisp, yellow-lined pad. Or loose sheets of copy paper, or an old-fashioned school notebook. Or treat yourself to one of those beautifully patterned books with blank pages.

**3. Write in pen rather than pencil.** With pen, you'll take yourself more seriously. (Don't worry if you have to cross out something. Better still, don't cross out anything.) If you like, try different colored pens. I've often used an assortment of felt-tipped Flairs and still swear that green and purple help the words flow easier. Few of us realize how color affects us and how we can choose to use it to inspire and elevate our writing.[2]

**4. Be consistent in format.** Decide where to put the date—upper right, upper left, in the center. If the time of entry is important to you, decide where to record it. Stay consistent.

**5. Number your pages.** Listen to yourself for what comes naturally: to number the pages consecutively throughout, say, a month, or instead by individual entry. I always number by the day only, seeing the entry as a little unit.

Such details may seem annoyingly mundane, but when you establish consistency, you feel and stay more organized and professional. And you're treating your journal, and yourself, with greater respect.

**6. Promise yourself a minimum number of entries a week.** Schedule them. Tell yourself this is your time. Announce it to your family, instruct the kids to mute the video games, shut the door, ignore the phone.

**7. Choose a place to write that you love, where you feel nurtured and safe.** This is particularly important in the beginning. Anna curls up in her den, her small dog nestled on her knees. I like the terrace outside, where I can glance up from my clipboard and absorb the trees and sky.

Later, you may be able to "carry" this space with you anywhere. Dedicated journal writers have told me they can now write at the dentist's office, on the supermarket line, and (not recommended) during television commercials.

\* \* \* \* \*

### Surrender to Your Journal

#### **8. Before you start, become quiet or meditate for a few minutes.**

Take a few deep breaths and look outside, preferably at some greenery or the horizon. Say with conviction:

- I express myself easily and fully.
- I fear nothing.
- I trust the perfect flow of words and ideas within me.

**9. Remind yourself that here in your journal you can write anything.** You're allowed to scrawl shamelessly whatever is at the tip of your brain or pen. No one will censure you, laugh at you, pronounce your writing revolting, or reprimand you for using X-rated words. You can always cross everything out or tear up the page. Risk. There's nothing to lose. Julia Cameron's "Morning Pages" in *The Artist's Way* are based on this principle. Her great descriptions and examples of "terrible" journal entries will make you feel good and give you courage. [3]

**10. Ask yourself questions on paper.** If, like Anna at that assignment, you feel "stuck," ask on the page, "Why?" Then listen. Your unconscious or inner self will respond. Write down what you hear.

**11. Still stuck? Write about your feelings.** If you can't seem to write because, again like Anna, strong emotions of anger, frustration, despair, or any other feeling are stopping you, describe them. You'll soon get caught up in the description and may find yourself writing about the underlying fears or conflicts. These may be highly revealing or depressing; at the least, you'll have gotten something down.

**12. Unburden.** If you can't write because a problem or situation is revolving endlessly in your head, possibly from #11, your journal is the perfect place to unburden. Spill it all out. Insights, and even resolutions,

may take you by surprise.

**13. Recognize that you may sometimes need a boost to begin writing.** One way is to start by reading your previous entry and then commenting on it. Another is to think about the day, or the last hour, and write about that.

**14. Admit blankness.** If you're sure you have nothing to say, accept it for the moment. Whenever I'm feeling barren, I repeat to myself advice I've often shared, the sage and knowing lines of American poet Richard Wilbur:

*Step off assuredly into the blank of your mind.  
Something will come to you. [4]*

**15. Trust your mind and what it wants to write.** Wilbur knew. No further elaboration needed.

**16. Your journal is on your side.** The journal is your friend, your confidant, your private therapist, and your personal writing teacher. Use it. You will make friends with your secret, cherished self.

\* \* \* \* \*

#### How Your Journal Helps Your Writing Projects

Do you need more reasons to start or continue your journal? Still think it's an emotional indulgence, an empty exercise, or, like Anna at first, an unproductive activity that takes valuable time away from your "real" writing? Well, read on.

**17. Journaling gets you to write regularly.** Daily is best, even for fifteen minutes. The discipline will ingrain itself in your mind/body/psyche/brain and become a habit you can transfer to your current projects.

**18. Journaling gives you practice in "freewriting."** This technique, taught as part of English, language arts, and creative writing courses, asks you to choose any subject.[5] Start with whatever comes to you and allow each idea to flow into the next. Soon you'll have a page and probably be ready for more.

Freewriting can lead to all kinds of glorious results. Important life events surface that are perfect for your latest work. A new exciting story idea, subject, character, theme, or realization appears. Or the solution emerges to an unyielding plot problem or character.

**19. Regular journal entries get you to loosen up in your writing.** Some writers don't feel they can touch certain subjects. One writer won't get near compulsive shopping and never uses mall scenes. Other writing friends admit they shy away from writing about sex, binge eating, physical abuse, or secret fantasies about other authors falling overboard on the cruise at which they're the star lecturer. Knowing no one else ever has to see it, in your journal you can give yourself permission to write on previously self-censored and forbidden topics.

**20. You start to experience literary gold.** The more relaxed you get, the more your natural creativity bubbles up. As you keep writing, without effort, stunning similes, superb metaphors, and fabulous turns of phrase will spring up full-blown on the page, like the mythological Greek warriors from dragon's teeth, ready to do battle with legions of blank lines.

**21. You start to admire your writing.** Maybe you look over your shoulder a little to see if anyone's watching, but now you dare to give yourself credit. You giggle, whisper to yourself, or even say out loud, "Hey, this is great! Brilliant!" And that soaring, matchless feeling comes over you that, yes, you're finally on the right path and doing what you were meant to do.

**22. You gain precious confidence.** With this newfound feeling of confidence, you resume or attack the writing you've been avoiding, stymied about, or have let drag on for too long.

\* \* \* \* \*

I'm sure you see from this list the journal's many lessons and rewards. With continued journaling, whatever stage you're at, you'll undoubtedly find more to appreciate. Enjoy your journal. It's a wonderful tool for understanding yourself and for growing emotionally, intellectually, professionally, and spiritually. And it's an instant, natural record of your progress and allegiance to your writing.

Your self-discoveries will give you the assurance to renew your commitment to yourself. With increased vigor and enthusiasm, you'll be raring to go, not only on to your next journal entry but on all your other writing projects. The next time a writing friend in trouble implores you for help, you'll nod compassionately. And you'll proudly share how you use your journal not only for restarting your writing but for continuous creativity.

#### Endnotes

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1. Natalie Goldberg, *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within* (Boston: Shambhala, 1986), pp. 6-7, 50. For the virtues of both handwriting and consistent journaling, see also Julia Cameron, *The Artist's Way: A Spiritual Path to Higher Creativity* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1992), especially pp. 9-18; and *Walking in This World: The Practical Art of Creativity* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 2002), pp. 7-9.
2. See Janet Ruth Falon's fascinating article on using color in writing, which she also addresses to computer users, "Follow the Rainbow to Find Artistic Inspiration," in *Writer's Guide to Creativity* (Cincinnati: Writer's Digest, June 2004), pp. 40-42.
3. See pp. 10-11, 170, 181. The Morning Pages, moreover, are "meditation" (p. 189).
4. Richard Wilbur, "Walking to Sleep," in *Walking to Sleep, New Poems and Translations* (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1969), p. 1, lines 3-4.
5. See, for example, Sheridan Blau and Peter Elbow, *The Writer's Craft* (Evanston, IL: McDouglas Little/Houghton Mifflin, 1995); and Gabriele Rico, *Writing the Natural Way* (New York, NY: Tarcher/Putnam, 2000).

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