Reflective Journaling Thinking

Idea In Short

Thoughts feel clear until you try to write them down. Reflective journaling is the habit of recording experiences, reactions, and reasoning over time so that you can examine them from a distance. Educators have used it for decades to build professional judgment, and its roots reach to John Dewey's work on reflective thinking and Donald Schön's work on reflective practice. Studies in education and medicine link structured reflective writing to learning, self-monitoring, and professional identity. For managers and consultants, a journal becomes a private record of decisions and doubts that exposes patterns no single day shows. This article explains how to start, what to write, how to review, and what limits to respect.

A consultant leaves a client workshop feeling that it went badly. That evening she writes for five minutes. She records what each participant said, her own annoyance when the sponsor interrupted, and the assumption that the group would follow her agenda. Before the page ends she sees that her irritation grew from being surprised, not from the sponsor's behavior, and she changes how she prepares sponsors.

What it is and where it comes from

Reflective journaling combines two old ideas: writing as thinking, and reflection as a source of learning. A Springer chapter on the method notes that its roots as a formal method of inquiry are often attributed to John Dewey and later to Donald Schön, whose writings on reflective practice describe intentional, structured reflection as a tool for improving one's practice.1

The chapter adds that Dewey emphasized pedagogy and professional development, while Schön described reflective practice as knowledge acquisition in itself and rejected the dichotomy between researcher and practitioner. He proposed instead a cyclical process.

For working managers, the idea is plain. Experience alone does not teach. Experience that you examine does. Writing gives you a tool for the examination.

Why writing helps

Writing slows thought. A guide from IRISS, a social services research and innovation institute, explains that by committing reflections to paper the learner can stand back from them and create another opportunity to reconstruct knowledge, awareness, and practice.2

The same guide notes that reflective writing differs from formal academic writing, although it underpins both. It is a skill developed over time and needs practice and perseverance.

That point sets expectations. Early entries often feel clumsy or shallow. They improve as you learn to ask better questions of your own experience.

Learning journals in professional settings

University College Dublin's teaching guide describes journals, logs, diaries, and portfolios as containers for writing recorded over a period of time, accompanying a program of learning, work, or placement. It says journals can be highly structured or free and have been used to improve learning in virtually every subject area, particularly in professional development.3

The guide stresses that what separates a learning journal from other writing is its focus on learning from experience. A diary says what happened. A learning journal asks what it means and what to do next.

For a manager, that means pairing each event with a question. Why did I decide that way? What did I assume? Which alternative did I skip?

Evidence from professional training

Research on reflective writing comes mostly from education. A systematic review in medical education found that a structured approach to reflective writing shapes the physician's belief system, guides practice, and nurtures professional identity. It also notes that reflective writing helps physicians consolidate learning and supports self-monitoring and self-regulation of decisions and conduct.4

A study of university students' reflective journals in Frontiers in Psychology designed a scheme for identifying dimensions of reflective thinking. It found that students' tendency to use reflective skills in their future lives was strongly linked to their long-term reflections, which covered academic, professional, personal, and multicultural development.5

Evidence for business leaders is thinner. Take the findings as support for the method and not as proof that journaling will raise your performance.

What to write

Use a simple frame for each entry. First, describe the event factually: who, what, when. Second, record your reaction: thoughts, feelings, and body signals. Third, name your assumptions: what you took for granted. Fourth, consider alternatives: how else could this have gone? Fifth, decide: what will you try next time?

Keep the description short and the analysis long. Many people write a page of events and a line of insight, which reverses the value.

Write in the first person, honestly. The journal is private. If you edit yourself for an imagined reader, you lose the main benefit, which is seeing your own logic.

Prompts that open up thinking

A few questions unlock entries on slow days. What surprised me today? Where did I feel resistance, and what was it protecting? What decision am I avoiding? What did I assume about a person that I did not check? What would I tell a colleague who faced this?

Use decision entries too. Before a major decision, write your reasoning and your confidence. After the outcome, write what happened. Over months, you build a record of how well your judgment tracks reality.

Add a weekly prompt. "What was the most important thing I learned this week, and what will I do about it?" gives each week a point.

Reviewing the record

Entries become powerful when you reread them. Set a date, such as the last Friday of each month, to read the past month in one sitting.

Look for patterns. Which situations raise the same reaction? Which assumptions keep failing? Which kinds of decisions turn out well, and which do not? Underline repeated words and themes.

Summarize in a few lines, and choose one change to try. A journal that is written and never read teaches far less than one that is reviewed.

Making it stick

Attach the habit to a fixed point in the day, such as after you close your laptop. Keep the tool close: a notebook, a note app, or a document.

Set a small floor, such as three lines. Missing days is normal. If you skip a week, start again without apology.

Protect privacy. Store the journal where others cannot read it, and decide in advance what you will never write down, such as confidential client details. Reflect on the pattern of your reasoning and not on secrets that you cannot safely keep.

Journaling together with a team

A private journal can pair with shared habits. Teams can hold short reflection sessions after projects, in which each person writes for five minutes and then shares one lesson. The writing step gives quieter members time to think before they speak.

Keep the shared and private versions separate. Share lessons about process and decisions, and keep personal reactions in the private journal. People speak more openly when they know what will stay private.

Leaders can model the practice by sharing a lesson of their own, including a mistake. When a manager says, "I assumed the client agreed, and I never checked," she shows that reflection is safe and useful.

A hypothetical example

Imagine a hypothetical engineering manager who journals for three months after a reorganization. Reading back, he finds that in nine of twelve entries on missed deadlines he blamed individual effort, while the entries describing the same projects mention unclear requirements six times.

He changes his approach. He begins project kickoffs with a requirements check and asks teams what blocked them before asking what they could do better. Missed deadlines fall over the next quarter. The case is invented, but it shows how a review of written reasoning can reveal an assumption that daily work hides.

Cautions

Do not let reflection turn into rumination. If entries circle the same worry without a next step, stop and talk with a trusted colleague or a professional.

Avoid self-flagellation. The aim is understanding, so write about behavior and reasoning, and treat yourself with the same fairness you would give a colleague.

Finally, keep claims modest. Most research on reflective writing comes from students and trainees, and its link to workplace results is less clear. Use the journal as a personal experiment and judge it by what you learn. Revisit the format after a month, and change prompts that no longer teach you anything.

- 1Reflective journaling as a method of inquiry
- 2Reflective writing
- 3Learning journals and logs
- 4Reflective writing in medical education, systematic review
- 5Dimensions of reflective journal writing

Summary

Reflective journaling thinking means writing regularly about experiences and reasoning so

that you can stand back, question your assumptions, and learn from patterns over time. Research in education and medical training links reflective writing to deeper learning, better self-monitoring, and a stronger sense of professional identity, though the evidence is mostly from students and trainees. A good entry describes what happened, how you reacted, what you assumed, and what you will do differently. The value grows when you review old entries. Start with five minutes at the end of each workday, write three honest lines, and read the past month's entries on a set date.