

THE FIRST PAGE / A FREE FIELD GUIDE

A Little Room to Write

How to begin, what to keep, and how to find your own words.

A free field guide to journaling. You do not need a dramatic story, beautiful handwriting or a plan to become a different person. This book is a place to try writing in your own voice.

Read online: after-slowly.pages.dev/how-to-journal

Free to read and download. No purchase or account required.

Find a place to begin.

You can start at the beginning or open the chapter that fits your day.

- 01 Begin with something small
- 02 Choose a shape that suits the day
- 03 When you do not know what to write
- 04 Be honest without putting yourself on trial
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- 06 Write to yourself as someone worth hearing
- 07 Say it on the page before deciding what to share
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Use this book your own way

The invitations are options. Skip a page, repeat one, write a list, add a picture, or leave a question unanswered. A journal is not a test, and you do not have to complete the book.

01 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Begin with something small

A page does not need to earn its place.

Choose a place where you can write without performing for an audience. Start with something close at hand: a sound, a conversation, the shape of the afternoon. A list counts. A drawing with three words underneath counts.

Try a short session you can comfortably finish. You can stop halfway through a sentence. The aim of this first page is to notice what it is like to give a thought somewhere to go.

The kitchen is finally quiet. I am still thinking about a joke I did not enjoy. I do not know what I want to do about it yet.

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Write three sentences: where you are, what is taking up space in your mind, and one thing you would like next.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What is one detail of this room I have not noticed today?
- What keeps returning to my attention?
- What would make this evening a little easier?

One line to begin with...

02 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Choose a shape that suits the day

A diary, a list, a picture, a letter. You can change forms.

A diary records what happened. A reflection looks at what an experience means to you. A collection keeps things that belong together, such as films you have watched or words you want to remember. A scrapbook lets pictures and objects do some of the telling.

You do not have to select a permanent style. Write a paragraph today and make a colour swatch tomorrow. Use a prompt when a blank page feels unhelpful, and leave the prompt behind when your own subject arrives.

A small entry might be a photo of the bus stop, the time you waited there, and one sentence about who you hoped would call.

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Tell the same small moment twice: once as a list of five details, then as a paragraph. Keep the version that feels more like you.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- Would this memory be easier to keep as a photo, a list or a story?
- What can an image show that my words cannot?
- What does my writing sound like when I am not trying to impress anyone?

One line to begin with...

03 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

When you do not know what to write

Start with a doorway, not a perfect topic.

Look at what is already in your day. A message you have not answered. A meal you liked. An object you keep moving between rooms. A song you returned to. Describe a particular detail before asking yourself to explain the whole story.

If you get stuck, write a sentence about being stuck. You can also make a loose map: put a word in the middle and surround it with whatever it brings to mind. Choose one branch to follow.

I do not know why I kept the ticket. Maybe I liked how that day felt. The part I remember most is the walk back, not the event itself.

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Choose an object within reach. Write what it looks like, where it came from, and one association you have with it.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What did I save on my phone this week?
- What is a tiny thing I am unexpectedly invested in?
- Which conversation still has an unfinished sentence in my mind?
- What colour feels like this part of my life, and why?

One line to begin with...

04 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Be honest without putting yourself on trial

Accuracy is more useful than a harsh verdict.

Try separating an observation from the conclusion you have attached to it. Write what you saw or heard, what you felt, and what you are guessing. You can be uncertain. An honest page can contain two conflicting feelings.

Watch for words that turn one event into a permanent identity. Ask whether there is a more specific description. You can acknowledge an action you regret while leaving room to understand it and choose a different response.

Instead of “I am a terrible friend”: “I cancelled twice this month. I was exhausted and avoided explaining it. I want to find a clearer way to say what I can manage.”

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Take one sweeping sentence you have written about yourself. Rewrite it using a specific event, an honest feeling and an open question.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What do I actually know here?
- What am I afraid this means?
- Which part is still uncertain?
- What would I write if this page did not have to prove I am good or bad?

One line to begin with...

05 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Find words for a feeling

You can start before you have the right name.

Describe the experience before trying to label it: when it appeared, what you noticed, and what you wanted to do. Words such as disappointed, relieved, tense, lonely, curious or numb may fit; a colour, an image or “I cannot name it yet” may fit better.

A feeling and an action are different things. Your page can hold anger without becoming a message you send. Notice whether you want company, rest, clarity, space or something practical. You do not have to turn every feeling into a solution.

I smiled during the call, but afterwards I wanted the room to be quiet. I think I felt overlooked. I would like someone to ask what I thought before moving on.

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Finish these in your own words: “What happened was...”, “For me, that felt like...”, “What I want to understand or ask for is...”.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What happened just before this feeling appeared?
- What name fits a little better than fine?
- What do I want that I have not said aloud?
- What would help me feel a little more present now?

One line to begin with...

06 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Write to yourself as someone worth hearing

Kindness does not require pretending everything went well.

Choose a manageable subject: a small mistake, an awkward moment or a part of yourself you find difficult to appreciate. Write with the same interest you might offer a friend. Leave out the insults. Keep the details.

Try naming both the difficulty and the care you want. A supportive page can include responsibility and a practical change. You do not have to force gratitude, find a silver lining, or forgive yourself on a deadline.

That conversation was awkward and I wish I had paused. I can see that I was trying to be understood. Next time I want to ask a question before defending my point.

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Write a short note that begins by acknowledging what was hard and ends with a form of support you would accept.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What effort did I make that I am overlooking?
- What is one quality I like in myself, with an actual example?
- What would care look like in the next hour?
- What can remain imperfect without becoming an insult?

One line to begin with...

07 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Say it on the page before deciding what to share

An unsent letter is complete without a recipient reading it.

Write to an initial, a role or a person you no longer speak to. Start with what you have wanted to say, what you miss or regret, and what boundary or next step belongs to you now. You can stop before explaining everything.

If you later choose to communicate, make a separate draft for that audience. Consider the purpose, the other person's boundaries, and the private information you would be disclosing. Writing something honestly does not create an obligation to send it or to reopen contact.

I wanted you to know how lonely that week felt. I am writing it here because I want to hear my own experience clearly. I am not deciding about contact tonight.

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Write the private version first. On a separate page, write one sentence about what sharing it would be for. You may decide to keep both pages private.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What have I been trying to get a reply to?
- What do I want to acknowledge without asking for a response?
- What would I keep for myself even if we spoke again?
- What is mine to take responsibility for?

One line to begin with...

08 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Make room for younger you

A gentle invitation, not a search for hidden memories.

You might write about a hobby you loved, something you wanted to try, a place that felt welcoming, or a time you wished for company. You choose the distance and the detail. An ordinary memory is enough.

Write only what you remember, and leave uncertainty visible. A prompt cannot tell you what happened or establish why you feel something now. If a subject feels too intense, choose the present instead: the room around you, a familiar object, or the support you would like today. These pages are optional reflections, not a treatment or a promise of healing.

I remember wanting to join in, and I am not sure what stopped me. I do know I liked drawing maps. I would enjoy trying that again without having to be good at it.

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Pick a comfortable childhood interest. Describe what you liked about it and one small way you might revisit it now.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What did I enjoy before I worried about being good at it?
- What did I want to try as a child?
- When did I wish someone would stay a little longer?
- Which details do I remember, and which do I not know?
- What helps me feel supported in the present?

One line to begin with...

09 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Keep ordinary life, not just turning points

The small things can tell the story of a year.

Make collections that reflect your actual interests: a reading shelf, a screen list, a playlist, an obsession of the month, a memorable meal or a personal review. Add what it meant to you, rather than only a score or a completed box.

A monthly recap can hold one bright spot, one difficulty, something unfinished and a photograph. A year does not need a single theme. Leave room for changing tastes, slow weeks and the parts you cannot sum up yet.

A film entry might say: "Watched on a rainy Sunday. I loved the quiet ending. I would recommend it when someone wants a patient story, not a quick plot."

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Choose one thing from this week and review it using your own criteria. What did you notice? What suited you? What would you choose differently?

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What am I listening to repeatedly?
- Which book, film or story stayed with me, and what part?
- What have I been learning about simply because I want to?
- What would I like to remember about this month?

One line to begin with...

10 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Use a tracker as a record, not a grade

A pattern can invite a question without proving a cause.

Decide what you want to record and what each mark means to you. A mood colour, a habit tick or a daily word can be useful shorthand. Missing days are missing information, not failures. Mixed feelings can share a day.

Look back with curiosity. A few colours next to one another do not establish what caused a feeling or what will happen next. Add context when it matters. You can change a tracker or stop using it when it no longer helps you notice what you care about.

A note beside a low-colour day might be: “Very little sleep, a difficult conversation, and an unexpectedly kind message.” The colour alone could not say all of that.

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Choose five labels that feel understandable to you. Write one sentence about what your tracker can show and one thing it cannot tell you.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What is useful for me to notice, rather than measure?
- What context belongs beside this mark?
- Does this tracker help, or has it become another demand?

One line to begin with...

11 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Let pictures do some of the writing

A scrapbook can be a record of attention.

Choose a photograph, a colour, a small drawing or a sticker because it belongs to the moment you are keeping. Add a date, a place if you want one, and one sentence that the image cannot tell on its own. Decoration is optional.

A four-frame photo strip can hold different views of one day. A free page can mix a photograph, a sentence and a piece of digital tape. Keep the layout readable for future you. Use your own images, and be thoughtful about other people's privacy if you later share a page.

Under a photograph of an empty table: "We stayed until closing. This was the first time in weeks I forgot to look at my phone."

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Pick one photograph. Add a visible detail, an invisible detail and a title you would recognise months from now.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What happened just outside this picture?
- What was I feeling when I took it?
- What is a detail the photograph does not capture?

One line to begin with...

12 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Reflect, then give yourself a way back to the day

A page can end with a question still open.

After describing an experience, consider what stands out to you, what you understand differently, and what you might want to try or ask. These are invitations, not compulsory stages. Sometimes the useful ending is that you do not know yet.

If you notice yourself repeating the same argument without learning anything new, try changing the scale. Name one fact, one uncertainty and one practical need. Or close the page. You are allowed to finish writing before the subject feels finished.

What I know: the plan changed. What I do not know: what my friend intended. What I need tonight: food and an earlier bedtime. I can ask about the plan tomorrow.

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Finish a page with a present-tense detail and a small choice for the rest of your day. The choice may simply be to pause.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What do I understand a little more clearly?
- What question can wait?
- What would I like to ask rather than assume?
- What am I returning to when I close this page?

One line to begin with...

13 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Choose who gets to read it

Private writing and public writing have different jobs.

A journal can contain things you would not put in a public post. Before sharing an extract, check for names, identifying details, photographs and information about someone else. You can rewrite or remove details, or keep the page for yourself.

Digital privacy also needs practical care. Sign out on shared devices, keep backups somewhere private and understand where a tool stores your writing. The free practice space in this guide saves only in this browser. Paid notebooks save to your signed-in account; that is not a claim of end-to-end encryption.

A public version can say “a difficult conversation” while the private page keeps the specific words and the questions you are still working through.

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Choose one page you might share. Mark what belongs only to you, what involves another person, and what you are comfortable making public.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- Who is this version for?
- What would I prefer not to make searchable?
- Do I have permission to share this photograph or detail?

One line to begin with...

14 / THE PRACTICE OF KEEPING A PAGE

Return without making a debt of it

You can begin again without catching up.

Choose a rhythm that fits your life: a line after lunch, a weekly note, a monthly recap or a page whenever something asks for attention. Leave a helpful starting point where you can find it. There is no need to reconstruct every missed day.

Try a small first week: one ordinary detail, a list of current favourites, a short reflection, a photograph with a caption, a note of appreciation, a question you are living with, and a look back at what you enjoyed making. These are seven options, not a streak you have to protect.

“It has been a while. Today I want to keep this one thing.” That is already a complete way back.

TRY A LITTLE PAGE

Choose the easiest invitation in this book. Write one small page. Then decide whether you want another one, a different shape, or a break.

A FEW INVITATIONS

- What made writing easier this time?
- What felt like a performance?
- What sort of page would I willingly return to?
- What would I like to keep next?

One line to begin with...

The reading behind this book.

Original writing for After, Slowly.

Written for After, Slowly. Original explanations, examples and invitations, informed by the resources listed here.

These resources informed the approach. The explanations, examples and invitations in this book are original. This guide makes no promise of treating or healing a condition.

Bullet Journal - Getting started, collections and reflection

Background on flexible collections, dated records and reviewing what matters.

<https://bulletjournal.com/blogs/faq>

University of Edinburgh - Written reflections

Background on personal reflective writing, revisiting thoughts and choosing an audience.

<https://reflection.ed.ac.uk/reflection-toolkit/producing-reflections/ways-reflecting/written>

University of Cambridge Libraries - Reflective writing

Background on moving beyond description to examine personal meaning.

<https://libguides.cam.ac.uk/reflectivepracticetoolkit/reflectivewriting>

Greater Good in Action, UC Berkeley - Self-Compassionate Letter

Background on a kinder tone in writing to yourself.

https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/self_compassionate_letter

Greater Good in Action, UC Berkeley - Expressive Writing

Background on choosing a manageable subject and keeping personal writing private.

https://ggia.berkeley.edu/practice/expressive_writing

A note about your writing

The free online practice area saves only in the browser you use. Download your writing if you want to keep it when changing devices. Paid notebooks save to your signed-in account; that does not mean end-to-end encryption. Consider names, photographs and other people's privacy before sharing an extract.

Sources reviewed 29 October 2026.