# Journal Writing

> A Fountain of Youth. A Fountain of Youth? How can a Fountain of Youth exist? Even if it did, why would I drink from it? I think I learn more from growing up than I would from that. I also don't think that I would change anything either. . . . I learn from my mistakes. At least I think that I do.
>
> Chastity's journal response to reading Hawthorne's short story, "Dr. Heidegger's Experiment"

Journal writing is an established practice for generating ideas for writing, and it is also a means for teaching literature (Fulwiler, 1987; Probst, 2004; Beach and Myers, 2001). Academic journal writing—the process of writing personal thoughts or responses to a text in a notebook or journal—allows students to slowly develop a personal connection with their own writing and with the text they are reading. As the theory of reader-response states, the process of reading is an interaction between the reader, the text, and the context. Through journal writing, students can develop and create the context, or lens, for which they can view canonical literature.

Journal writing can do the following:
• Permit responses that are not constrained
• Allow students to tap into their personal knowledge
• Unlock the thematic ideas of the canonical text
• Provide students with the opportunity for reflection and contemplation of the text and their own thoughts and feelings
• Help students learn to write effectively
• Develop strategies to develop their higher-order thinking
The journal-writing activity can be used as a pre-reading, during-reading, or post-reading strategy .Journal writing offers the benefits shown in Exhibit 5.2.

### Journal Prompts in Action

Charles, Katie's teacher and friend, uses journal-writing activities as motivators for the students. Before the students read a text, Charles's students usually participate in pre-reading activities. Charles often uses journal writing as a means of motivating the students with a text. For example, before the students read *To Kill a Mockingbird*, Charles thought of ways to tap into their personal knowledge. He asked whether they have ever visited the South or a rural place; then he asked that they put their answer in the form of a journal entry. Charles asked his students to describe it; if they haven't had this kind of experience, he asked them to imagine what it would be like. Charles shared his experience,

## Exhibit 5.2 Academic Benefits of Journal Writing

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| Pre-reading | Allows students to access prior knowledge/experience and relate it to the text before reading<br>Allows readers to nurture a preliminary connection to a text<br>Can be used as a tool for students to break down and comprehend canonical literature |
| During reading | Can be used to assess comprehension of the text<br>Can be used to increase comprehension of the text<br>Helps develop a personal connection with the text, thus increasing comprehension |
| Post-reading | Helps develop a full understanding of the theme of the piece and its relation to readers' own personal lives<br>Helps develop an understanding of the author's intent |

> As we discuss their journal responses, we talk about what the roads may be like. For example, what are the mosquitoes like at night? It really helps to create this image in the students' minds about what it is that we're going to start reading. They have this image of what it may be like to live in the setting of the book. They have a sense of what this time and place is really like. It's just that little something that helps them to relate to the reading.

This ''little something,'' as Charles calls it, is important. Through the journal writing that students did in his class, students were invited to become involved in the text world of *To Kill a Mockingbird*. Thus they took the first step in becoming active participants in this text world. Katie encouraged her students to explore themes, ideas, and characters prior to reading a particular text. When Katie taught Hawthorne's short story, ''Dr. Heidegger's Experiment,'' she asked them to respond to the following prompt in their journals:

> If you were standing in front of the Fountain of Youth, would you drink from it? If you could go back and change something in your life, what would you change? Why would you change it?

Over her time in the classroom, Katie feels she must have posed this pre-reading journal question to at least five hundred students. Their responses explored the thematic ideas presented in this short story prior to their reading. Their responses were as varied as students' lives normally are, but a few had more memorable lives than others. The example that follows demonstrate the thematic density of some literary texts, as students described their insights and explorations in their journals. Oman—a shy, introverted student in Katie's sophomore English class— wrote:

It would be interesting to drink from The Fountain of Youth and I think I would do it as long as I could switch back. I mean I'm not sure that I would want to stay fifteen forever. Like, what could I do? I mean I can't live on my own and I would be stuck in school forever. I might change some things but I wonder if I changed my things and what I've done if other people would notice. Would other people around be changed? I don't think people can change all that much.

Oman's response to the journal prompt reveals what often comes out about the four main characters in ''Dr. Heidegger's Experiment'': people are generally doomed to consistently repeat the same mistakes over and over. Through their journal responses, Oman and Chastity demonstrate that they have unlocked the thematic ideas from Hawthorne's short story. This process of reflection that journal writing creates is that little something extra that Charles described and that encourages and invites the students to explore the text. To help students unlock these thematic ideas, teachers must take the step of creating and using challenging journal questions to which students can respond.

### Creating and Implementing Journal Prompts in the Classroom

The students' responses were developed over time. These students did not respond so candidly when they first were asked to respond to journal prompts; their ability to express their thoughts and feelings on paper took time to develop. As is true of writing, constructing meaning and developing a personal response to literature is a process. When they use journal responses for the first time in class, teachers will find that it takes time for students to accept that no single answer is expected from them and that their opinions and thoughts will be accepted. It may take as many as five to ten journal responses for students to start to be able to reflect on their personal response. The purpose of the journals is to allow students to develop personal connections with the text, in order to increase their own comprehension of the intent of the author, as well as to question their own perception of the literature. Therefore, journal responses should be graded on effort or on completion of the task, *not* on grammar or the accuracy of the response. When creating journal prompts, start by referring back to the section on creating questions in Chapter One.

#### Guidelines for Creating Effective Journal Prompts

When creating inquiry questions for canonical text, try to create prompts that

- Allow students to directly relate thematic events in the literature to events in their present-day lives
- Do not require a yes-or-no response and are thought provoking
- Tie in the themes of the canonical literature with personal reflection

## Examples of Weak Journal Prompts

*Weak question:* In *The Scarlet Letter*, what did Hester Prynne do when she saw Arthur Dimsdale standing on the scaffold surrounded by the townspeople so early in the morning?

Weak because it only requires the student to pull the information directly from the text.

*Improved question:* In *The Scarlet Letter*, what did Hester Prynne do when she saw Arthur Dimsdale standing on the scaffold surrounded by the townspeople so early in the morning? If you were Hester, would you have responded the same way? Why or why not?

Better because it requires students to reflect on their own actions in that situation and to expand on their response.

*Weak question:* In *The Scarlet Letter*, do you think Hester Prynne was treated fairly?

Weak because students only have to answer with a yes-or-no answer

*Improved question:* In *The Scarlet Letter*, do you think Hester Prynne was treated fairly? How would her situation have been different if the story was written in the present?

The addition of the follow-up question allows students to develop a personal connection with the text and perspective on how things were different for people at a different time in history.

**Follow-Up Discussion to Journal Entries**

As shown in the examples, the use of journal prompts can lead directly to a class discussion about the responses. Again, it will take time for students to become comfortable sharing their responses, but this comfort level can be increased. To start, it may be helpful to ask if anyone feels comfortable sharing their responses. Focus on the students' opinions and repeat what they say, in order to elicit further reflection. For additional suggestions for eliciting class discussions, refer to Chapter One: Student Voice, Discussion, and Lecture.