

# THE BENEFITS OF PAPER JOURNAL WRITING FOR STUDENTS IN ONLINE CLASSES

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## THE CONTEXT OF JOURNAL WRITING IN READING AND WRITING COURSES

Research suggests that personal journal writing in a second language (L2) is beneficial to language learners. Casanave (2011) calls it a “risk-free, personal, reflective, and responsive writing activity done regularly in a style that suits the writer’s personality and proficiency level” (p. 5). Free journaling as a form of extensive writing also benefits the development of fluency and confidence (Herder & King, 2012). Additionally, dialogue journal writing in the ESL classroom acknowledges “the learner’s need to communicate with others in a meaningful context” (Orem, 2001, p.74). The repeated practice of diary writing, kept fresh and engaging with interesting and personalized topics, serves as a staple in fluency-building exercises in a reading and writing curriculum.

## THE DILEMMA: MAINTAINING JOURNALS IN AN ONLINE CURRICULUM

With the necessity of an online, distance approach to my reading and writing courses this semester, I had to consider whether journal writing was still feasible. With students no longer localized in a classroom, I would be unable to time and monitor their journal writing and collect their journals for assessment and comments. One possible solution was to adapt the activity to be done entirely online by utilizing Google Docs, allowing students to type their diaries into cloud-based documents shared with me. However, I anticipated a decline in quality if I switched to online entries based on my observations that student typing speeds vary widely, both due to different levels of experience and different technical affordances such as keyboards. As a compromise, I decided to continue paper-based journal writing and have the students attach digital photos of the pages into shared Google Docs. Those files featured detailed instructions, model diary entries, and a field for comments or questions. After I explained and demonstrated the task during the first week of class, the students began writing five-minute timed journal entries at the end of each class based on topics that they had discussed in groups beforehand. This paper serves as my reflection on three perceived benefits of maintaining paper-based journal writing.

## THE THREE BENEFITS TO PAPER-BASED WRITING DURING ONLINE CLASS

### **An Increase in Reflective Writing Opportunities**

Specht (2019) says that reflective learning allows students to take a step back from the classroom experience “to develop critical thinking skills and to improve on future performance by analyzing experiences” (p. 61) in order to improve skills and practice. This means reflective writing is not simply a writing exercise to review previous experiences: it is also the chance to

predict application of those experiences in the future while building writing proficiency and language fluency. Orem (2001) says that students reflecting through journal writing engage with the act of writing itself “and its implications for social change and personal empowerment” (p. 76). With its benefits to student language practice and personal growth, reflective writing is therefore a crucial component of the learning cycle in a reading and writing course.

In a reading and writing course course, students often reflect through journal writing, whether as a formal, cumulative review of a unit project, or a casual recollection of their weekend experiences. Implementing paper-based journal writing in the online course opened additional reflective writing chances for participants both in response to their lived experiences and as analysis of their writing processes. To elucidate, while many of the journal prompts were naturally reflective, it was the addition of the “comments and questions” field in the Google Docs file (in which they attached their journals) that allowed for an increase in reflective writing occurrences this semester. About half of the students in my classes utilized that space to write written reflections without prompting. Either throughout the week after uploading their journals or at the end of the week before they turned the Google Doc in, many students would reflect on their engagement with the course content such as what they enjoyed or what was difficult for them. They would also reflect on the journals they had written that week, responding to them with new thoughts, asking questions to me about my experiences with the journal topics, seeking clarification on what they had written (such as a word used or grammar pattern) or analyzing their own changes in proficiency, noting increases or decreases in total words written, journal prompt ease or difficulty, and so on. Between the inherent reflective benefit of journal writing and the new chance for reflection through post-commentary, maintaining traditional journaling in an online course essentially doubled opportunities for reflection.

### **A Reduction in Technological Pitfalls**

Having taught different writing courses at KUIS over the course of four years, I have noticed a trend amongst many of the students: their fluency and speed suffers significantly when they use iPads to construct written texts compared to using pen and paper. I believe that the prime factors for this discrepancy include the lack of a built in keyboard, the lack of a typing prerequisite course for the aforementioned classes despite the iPad being a required tool, and assistive features of the iPad including auto-complete, auto-correct, and predictive text. I consider these to be roadblocks to fluency-building activities requiring speed, and they can be detrimental to encouraging fluid L2 thought processes. Students often hesitate at word-level as they tap on the screen to type two to three letters then stop to check what the iPad suggests. Additionally, students are often distracted by suggestions for subsequent words and pop-ups with spelling corrections, causing many of them to lose their thought or at least their pacing. Maintaining pen-and-paper writing exercises this semester helped to balance out these distractors, and participant journal entries demonstrated more fluent construction and higher word count than comparable typed texts completed within similar time limits.

### **A Reprieve from Screen Time**

A common concern among online learning stakeholders is the amount of time participants are expected to spend engaged with digital devices compared to a standard classroom experience. A review of literature exploring the adverse effects of digital media on adolescents reveals that excessive screen time negatively impacts sleep patterns, increases risk for cardiovascular diseases, impairs vision, impacts psychological health, and can affect social wellbeing (Lissak, 2018). Aware of the potential harm of extensive screen time, KUIS administration has requested that teachers shorten Zoom virtual class sessions when possible to reduce the harm resulting from overuse of technology this semester. Nevertheless, with the semester length reduced by three weeks, teachers were expected to provide for fifteen weeks' worth of language learning opportunities for students, which means an overall increase in assignments which are, of necessity, mostly online and in digital format. My decision to maintain an analog learning activity was partially in response to this dilemma. Because writers need to write continuously in order to improve, doing so offline during a regularly designated time four times a week provides a consistent language learning and usage opportunity as well as a guaranteed break from the screen. I have found that paper-based journal writing is a simple yet significant way to provide a short respite from iPad use while still engaging students in meaningful L2 development.

## **SUMMARY AND SUGGESTIONS**

The level of engagement that most students have demonstrated in paper journal writing and in post-writing commentary suggests that participants appreciate the chances to reflect, develop their fluency, and unplug from technology. Finally, while I advise online writing teachers to consider incorporating paper-based journaling for the inherent benefits, there is room for research into the issues this paper explored. First, what are student perceptions of paper journal writing in an age of digital communication? Second, what credence is there to the observation of a disparity between written text composed on an iPad compared to that produced with pen and paper? Finally, could there be more significant application of offline language learning activities, such as the distribution of paperback books for fluency reading in an online course, to better alleviate stress and fatigue caused by screen-time? The considerably unmapped territories of online ESL courses at Japanese universities require more analysis and consideration in order to best benefit students and teachers alike.

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