

Keeping a research journal that works for you

Think of a research journal and you may imagine a well-thumbed notebook replete with insightful entries, answers to research questions and a chronicle of the key moments that led to this point. However, as [Nicole Brown](#) (author of [Making the Most of Your Research Journal](#)) outlines, misconceptions about the perfect research journal often derail this project before it has even begun. Highlighting four common myths about 'the' research journal, she suggests finding an enjoyable and creative medium for recording a range of activities around your work is more important than striving to replicate an ideal model.

Writing, and more specifically, academic writing plays a key role in Higher Education. We write for assignments, for publications in journals and books, for public engagement, for research impact, for grant applications, for stakeholder reports; the list is endless. It is therefore not surprising that there are so many courses and guides on how to write faster, better, more effectively. Alongside all these tasks, we are often advised to keep a research journal for our personal and professional development. Yet, there is little specific guidance for how to keep an effective research diary, which notes to take, or what to do with our entries in a research journal. Consequently, many feel under pressure to maintain the perfect research journal, to create relevant and appropriate research entries in specific formats, and to record entries regularly and consistently.

In reality, there are just too many myths around research journaling. Our misconceptions and our belief in those myths often lead us to give up. It does not have to be that way. Research journaling is a step towards academic writing, towards developing an authorial voice and a researcher identity. We just have to face some facts, first.

Myth 1: Research journaling is to accompany the research process

Well, yes and no. In many research methods handbooks and dissertation modules, we are indeed told to maintain a research journal to ensure we are working reflexively, to develop our positionality statement and, of course, to record anything that is important to the research process. The research journal does have that purpose. But it is not its only purpose. We may also journal to keep a record of our professional development, of our achievements, of our professional activities, of our networks and contacts, and so, to prepare us for and support us in our work as researchers beyond any single project.

Myth 2: Research journaling is academic writing

Again, this is partly true. Through writing we are indeed able to develop our authorial voice, our thought processes, our analyses, but then for some this may happen better in ways and means other than writing. You may find that recording yourself speak on a Dictaphone or creating a collage will help you with moving from the descriptive to the analytical. In this respect, research journaling is definitely academic work, but it does not need to be writing.



Myth 3: There is the entry in the research journal

No. When research reports and publications quote extracts from a research journal, the entries are fully formulated sections written in the most beautiful prose language with significant analytical insights and identifications of key concepts. That entry will have been developed by research journaling, but that is most often not the first entry on that same topic. Even in disciplines where notetaking in the field and developing theories from those notes on observations are intrinsic ways of working, there are processes. It is only natural to move from rough notes to more in-depth descriptions in several iterations until we arrive at the conceptualised, analytical prose that we will share in articles and reports.

Myth 4: There is the research journal

No, definitely not. We rarely get to see each other's research journals, but when we do, we may find our misconceptions are skewed. I myself have attended conferences or workshops where I ended up sitting next to the person with the research journal: a perfect, pristine, beautiful, well organised, hand-paginated book with cross-references and annotations, containing key words and search terms along with an index, and all in perfect cursive handwriting. My own scribbles across several loose, unnumbered pages not only pale in comparison, but become a source of deep embarrassment, guilt and envy in those moments. What I have learned over the years is that for many academics the research journal they bring to conferences or workshops is not their only one, and that their other research journals look quite different. I cannot speak for others, but I know I have a blog, files on my computer, recordings on my iPad, pieces of papers and post-it notes alongside some sketchbooks and notebooks – fully or partially filled, some neat, others messy. My “research journal” is the combination of all those.

In sum, as there is no guidance, there are also no rules around research journaling, which we should see as an opportunity to be playful and creative and to experiment. A good research journal will be a source of fun or pleasure, rather than pressure and dread.

Note: This post gives the views of the authors, and not the position of the LSE Impact Blog, or of the London School of Economics.

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