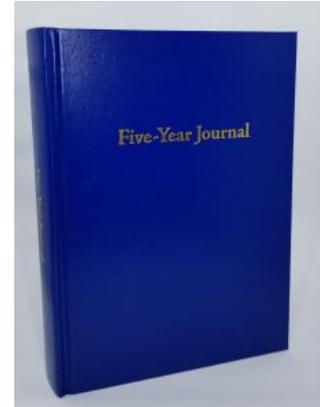


Six Ways to Mine Your Five-Year Journal

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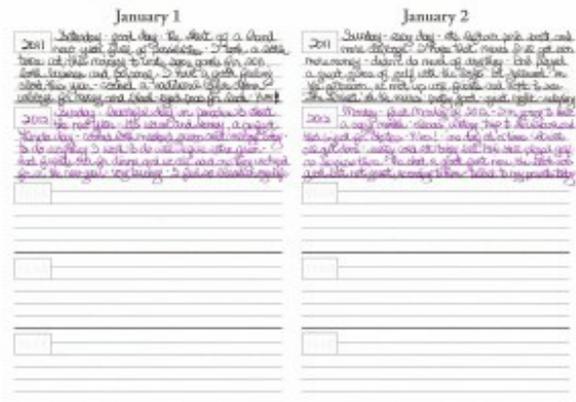
Patricia

I have been talking a lot about our Five-Year Journals lately. I explained how I use mine in [this video](#), shared the benefits of writing in one, and showed how easy it is to do. One Writing Your Life follower recently told me, “If you can brush your teeth, you can write in your five-year journal!” It really can be that quick and easy.



Maybe you're just starting out with a brand new five-year journal, or perhaps you've been writing in one for years and are on your second or third five-year journal. In any case, you're journaling. Now what? What is the point of doing this, again?

I'm reminded of a line from the theme song of the soap opera *Days of Our Lives*: “Like sands in the hourglass, so are the *Days of Our Lives*.” Yes, and unless we capture a few of those grains of sand each day, they are gone forever. Our minds can never reliably hold all of the details of our experiences and our responses to them.



That is why our journals, whether a five-year, a spiral notebook, or anything in between are priceless resources for writing memoir. The pages of these precious memory-keepers are where we capture grainy details of life. Yet, our filled journals are not meant to find their fate on a dusty shelf. Turn to your treasure troves of past moments and breathe new life into them, form long-gone details into a unique work of art—your memoir.

Here are six tips on how to mine your five-year journal to bring life and details to your memoir.

1. Scan

The first thing to do when you want to mine the contents of a completed original journal is scan it into a digitized file. Save it as a .PDF document. This will ensure your journal is preserved, no matter what you end up doing with it.

2. Identify

Resist the urge to jump right in and start reading or printing out your journal pages. You first want to identify the core themes, subject, or time period you are interested in including in your memoir. Do some brainstorming on paper. This will direct your search in the next steps.

3. Read

Read your journal on-screen for now. Peruse your entries individually, looking for those that relate to the items you identified in step two. Print off the relevant pages only.

4. Inform

Some details seem truly insignificant at the time we journal them: the weather, what we cooked for dinner, the day we had the root canal, the twenty-fifth customer meeting at Panera Bread in as many days, the hacking of the bank account. However, these bits can be the very details that whisper credibility into our work. This is what anchors our story in time and space, especially if read generations later.

This is where you want to slow down your reading of the print-outs and start zeroing in on the details. Little bits of specificity bring texture, dimension, and spice to the memory or event you are reconstructing for the reader. Look for details that inform your reader: *the who, what, when, where, how, why*; location or setting; memorable quotes; bits of dialogue; sensory details; emotions; world events; anything that connects to the context of your larger story or core themes.

5. Highlight

As you encounter details that will add depth to your work, get your favorite highlighter and start marking the significant portions of your printed journal entries.

6. Dictate

Should you have a significant amount of journal entries you plan to use, it is likely the task of typing all that text seems daunting. Enter speech-to-text dictation software. Simply open the software and begin reading the entries you want to transcribe. Voila! Dragon Naturally Speaking, available for both PC and Mac, is my favorite software option with prices starting around \$50 and up. Microsoft Word also has a dictate function that translates spoken words into text. Dictation is ideal for a task like this and will save you time and sanity.

Now, you are ready to begin writing. Remember, I always say to start small. Pick one story and begin building it, detail by detail. You've mined the treasures from your journal. It's time to bring those treasures into the light of day!