

Journaling Overview

One of the components of the Basic Law Enforcement Academy is the **learning journal**. The learning journal is not a “diary”. Instead, when used correctly, the journal is an extremely effective learning tool. A proper journal entry causes the writer to face the strengths and weaknesses of their own performance, identify solutions to correct their weaknesses, and gain confidence in their strengths. Depending on the learning style and preferences of the trainee, the journal can be a very effective component of the academy. It can allow you to understand not just the mechanics of daily police tasks, but also the underlying concepts and how they are interrelated.

Effective journal writing is HARD. The act of writing down an honest self-critique of personal performance can be as difficult as learning the performance itself. Often, the understanding of a concept doesn’t even occur until the moment you are engaged in writing a journal entry. This is why journals are effective: they force the writer to slow down their thinking, consider the clarity of their words, and reflect on why and how they performed. The process frequently produces an understanding that is not possible through any other learning method.

Because they are difficult to write, too often, you may be tempted to choose the easier path: to narrate about an event and stop writing before you reach any meaningful self-reflection. Event narration serves no purpose for you. It describes only what you did, not what you learned or what you still need to learn. No self-reflection occurs, nor does any useful learning. The journal writing becomes only a task to be completed and no longer contributes to the greater learning process.

To avoid this pitfall, it is valuable to journal using the **DPA** acronym:

Describe
Personalize
Act

Begin by *briefly* **describing** the incident to be recorded. The narrative is limited to only enough information to refresh the incident in the writer’s mind. This sets the context for the next portion: **personalizing**.

Personalizing is arguably the most important component of professional journaling, as it is where the learning occurs. The writer must challenge themselves to honestly and accurately discuss their performance, their decision process, and recognition of their own learning needs. Too often, recruits find themselves simply listing what they did right for a given incident. While this is good for the ego, it has no training benefit. Instead, you must challenge yourself to reflect on *where you are and where you need to be* with your current knowledge level. Once this disconnect is identified, you are ready to write on the last portion of the DPA process: **action**.

The **action** portion of a journal entry is short and concise. The writer commits to a learning plan, or learning goal, based on the training needs identified in the **personalizing** portion of the document. The writer must describe what is to be learned, how it will be learned, a deadline by which the learning must occur, and how the learning will be demonstrated. For example, a recruit who recognizes that he lacks skill in performing building search may set the following action plan for himself:

“Within the next week, I will contact at least one TAC for instruction on correctly conducting a building search. I will also get with my partner to practice these techniques.”

Such a statement presents a clear learning goal for the trainee, and provides the method by which they prove their learning to themselves and their trainer.

Overall, the DPA process provides a framework for a recruit who may otherwise have trouble identifying the purpose and content of a professional journal. If nothing else, the process can provide a starting point until a recruit is comfortable with a free-form journal.

- Journaling will:
 - Strengthen the learning process;
 - Identify areas for improvement;
 - Aids in creative thinking and evaluation; and
- The purpose is to jog the author's memory and to record perceptions related to learning.
- The journal is not a checklist.
- Use journaling to assess his/her own learning within the course.
- The writer should include areas of positive and negative training performance.
- An opportunity for self-reflection on what they have been learning, what they understand, and what they do not, as well as what they think and feel about the material they've experienced.
- Comment on their learning strengths and weaknesses.
- Done each day to record the trainee's learning, things that the trainee needs to know, and other learning issues that arise.
- The journal is legally discoverable in some jurisdictions therefore it should be kept professional and straightforward.
- Fundamentally, it is a person's personal record of his/her own learning.
- Journaling is a critically important part of the learning process.