

# Dialogue Journals: *What, Why, and How*

**“I like dialogue journals because the teacher gets to know about me ... the teacher does not tell us what to write about ... we could write about other stuff, things that aren’t about school, things that she hasn’t taught us ... I feel like I am teaching her things about me. When I get a letter back from the teacher, I feel like she has read my letter and that feels good. —Miriam (pseudonym), 10 years old” (Stillman et al.).**

Dialogue journals provide a space for written conversations between students and teachers. They may take many forms—open-ended exchange, responses to occasional engaging prompts, or a mixture of both—but they should always remain a space for appropriately informal, friendly conversation, as opposed to a space for evaluation or direct instruction.

In response to a child’s dialogue journal, a teacher may offer a brief question to stimulate further thought or a brief comment to connect with and extend a child’s ideas. Teachers’ responses should demonstrate that they are listening to children thoroughly, taking their ideas seriously, and caring about their thinking.

## Why we use dialogue journals ...

- Dialogue journals help us get to know children at the beginning of the year, and to develop strong relationships with them throughout the year. In particular, they help us build better relationships with children who are shy about speaking in class, or who may feel alienated from school and/or classmates.
- Dialogue journals “keep communication open throughout the year and help deepen the teacher-student relationship over time. For many students it is much easier to write their thoughts on paper, rather than to say them out loud” (Howard).
- Dialogue journals motivate children to write, and often encourage children to extend and improve their writing fluency, indirectly, as children naturally absorb the model of our own writing and also respond to our

friendly, non-evaluative comments and questions with further elaboration of their own ideas.

- Dialogue journals are a particularly powerful instructional routine for English language learners, who may choose to use their English skills to communicate in this informal, conversational manner. Dialogue journals provide a space for translanguaging and/or writing in languages other than English, as well as for improvising and using dashes and/or drawings when English words or syntactical structures are unknown.

“Using their first language (L1), their second language (L2), or both, people learning English constantly practice literacy to make sense of what they encounter. As the dialogic journal develops authentic communication between two people, it provides a process that can support L1 and L2 progress ... The journals offer children a channel for self-expression and opportunities to share their opinions about events freely. They often convey the learner’s interpersonal and personal interests and concerns ... Journal writing can promote literacy development, especially reading for beginning English learners” (Kim).

- When focused on a particular book, topic, or subject area—such a whole class novel or a science/social studies unit—dialogue journals enable us to understand and draw out children’s thinking, providing ourselves with valuable information for the

development of lessons and children with the opportunities to rehearse their ideas in writing before expressing them orally, resulting in writing supporting discussion as well as discussion supporting writing.

### Suggestions for using dialogue journals ...

**Time spent on dialogue journals:** Try to put aside 10–15 minutes a day, or at least two or three times a week, for children to write in dialogue journals, with very young children and new English learners using drawing, labels, and dashes when needed to express what they do not have words for. Try to respond at least once a week or more to the youngest children’s journals, as they often need our input and encouragement to keep extending their thoughts, and at least once a week or every two weeks to older children’s journals, often responding to half the class one week and the other half the next, in an ongoing cycle.

**Responding to children in journal (grade-level modifications):** With younger children, we write brief, friendly comments and questions to show we are listening, interested, and eager to learn more as well as to draw appropriate connections between children’s experiences and our own experiences:

- “Can you tell me more about ...?”
- “What do you think about ...?”
- “That’s so \_\_\_\_\_, what happened next?”
- “I was wondering (about, how, why, when) ...”
- “That reminds me of when ...”
- “I also ...”

With older children, we use the same types of brief, friendly comments and questions as with younger children. We also, sometimes, use paragraph-long entries or half-page “letters” to respond at length, making sure that when we offer these kinds of extended response, we are doing them for all children and announcing our intention

to do so to the whole class: “This week I am planning to really get back to each of you with a letter in your dialogue journals.”

Consider how to use digital dialogue journals with older students, writing back to them in google docs or other online programs that allow for shared, synchronous, and asynchronous writing.

**Using dialogue journals with younger children:** Dialogue journals are often used with children in grades 3–5, but they work well with younger children as well and can be a very powerful tool for helping younger children become engaged in writing, as they draw on their own direct experience and interests.

- One way to manage dialogue journals with early writers is to do them once a week or more with rotating groups of children. While one child is reading their journal to you, other children can be working on their responses. Because you are there, in person, with the children who are responding, you can scaffold a brief written question in their journal with a verbal response, or reading of the question, in order to help them respond and understand your written comment.
- If younger children are working on their dialogue journals independently, have the children whose journals you are planning to respond to that day read them to you briefly and/or explain their drawings, so that you can write back with a short question or drawing that you can read to them when you hand the journals back.

**How dialogue journals support diversity, equity, and inclusion:** Dialogue journals strengthen diversity, equity, and inclusion for three reasons:

- They allow children to represent themselves as they wish to be represented.
- They draw on and honor the funds of knowledge children bring with them from their families and communities.

- They let children recognize the diverse experiences and knowledge of their classmates.

Because dialogue journals allow us to get to know children in ways that are grounded in their own lives and points of view, they have the potential to foster the growth of diversity, equity, and inclusion in our classrooms. But, ultimately, it will be the thoughtfulness with which we use dialogue journals that will determine how well they actually help to support diversity, equity, and inclusion.

### Do's and Don'ts for dialogue journals:

Paying attention to a few do's and don'ts when implementing dialogue journals ensures that they are a worthwhile activity.

#### Do's:

- Follow children's "lead" and interests in terms of the topics and content written about.
- Steer writing away from over-sharing or overly personal topics when it veers in that direction.

- Be sensitive in the handling of personal information if it comes up, tailoring your response to your understanding of the particular child's needs and situation.
- Do encourage children to use topics and ideas from their dialogue journals in writing workshop.

#### Don'ts:

- Promise to respond to dialogue journals more than is reasonable, remembering that many upper grade teachers only respond to a few journals a day, so that every child gets a response each week or two. And many early grade teachers only do dialogue journal groups a few times a week.

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## Citations and Further Reading

Grande, Marya. "Using Dialogue Journals and Interest Inventories with Classroom Volunteers." *Teaching Exceptional Children*, vol. 41, no. 2, 2008, pp. 56–63.

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Staton, Jana. "ERIC/RCS Report: Dialogue Journals." *Language Arts*, vol. 65, no. 2, 1988, pp. 198–201.

Stillman, Jamy, et al. "Returning to Reciprocity, Using Dialogue Journals To Teach and Learn." *Language Arts*, vol. 91, no. 3, 2014, pp. 146–160.