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The Intentional Handwriting Guide

The power of writing by hand to learn, grow and generate new ideas

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The Power of Writing by Hand

Why should you write by hand? In today's modern world, pen-and-paper notes may seem old fashioned. After all, digital note-taking software allows you to organize your notes, rearrange content, search for keywords on command, and much more.

While digital note-taking has its place, **handwritten notes hold a hidden superpower: they enhance your ability to learn.** Research has shown that writing out notes by hand increases learning, recognition performance, and visual recognition of words and characters. It also facilitates memorization and improves your recall skills.

In short? **Writing by hand is good for your brain.** In this guide, we'll explore the science behind handwriting and learn why it's useful for learning and personal development. We'll also share three types of writing that especially benefit from a handwritten approach: journaling about experiences, taking notes during a talk or meeting, and brainstorming big ideas.

The Science Behind Writing By Hand

How does writing by hand help you learn?

The power of handwriting lies in its ability to activate multiple parts of your brain. Handwriting is a perceptual-motor experience that requires nuanced hand movements to shape letters on the page. When your brain engages in this complex activity, it increases focus, creating an additional layer of memory and increased semantic processing.

“The simple act of writing by hand provides a perceptual-motor experience that unifies what is being learned ... which in turn creates richer knowledge and fuller, true learning,” said [handwriting researchers Brenda Rapp and Robert Wiley](#) in a press release about their work. They are highlighting an important point: **writing by hand increases your depth of processing**. When you write by hand, you are engaging multiple parts of your brain, which allows you to process the information you’re learning in a more complete way.

What are the daily benefits of writing by hand?

The benefits of writing by hand during early life are clear: it helps young learners develop fine motor skills, learn the alphabet, and practice vocabulary, while middle-school and high-school learners benefit from its ability to help them memorize information and recall details from class. What is less clear, at first glance, is the role of writing by hand in everyday life. **How can writing by hand benefit a busy working adult?**

To start, all adults are lifelong learners. No matter who you are or what you do for a living, it’s likely that you’re learning new skills every day. When you write down notes about something you’ve just learned — whether it’s a new process at work or a new recipe from a family member — you are reinforcing the new information and helping it stick in your brain. Then, when you engage in the activity, you are better able to recall the information and use it in the moment.

In short? Writing by hand is useful *any time* you’re learning something new.

Does writing by hand have other benefits?

Yes! In addition to helping you learn, handwriting has been shown to support other personal development activities. Writing by hand can help you:

- Develop critical thinking skills
- Generate new ideas
- Make new connections
- Process recent experiences and events

We'll share more about these benefits, and how you can put them into practice in your own life, in the following sections.

3 Kinds of Writing That Benefit from a Handwritten Approach

So far, you've learned the incredible power of writing by hand to help you learn new information. In addition to learning, however, writing by hand is especially useful for a specific kind of activity: **making new connections**.

When you write to make new connections, you are thinking at a deep level. You might be asking big questions, contemplating a problem, exploring potential solutions, or creating a vision for your future. Writing at this level involves creativity, openness, and experimentation. It benefits from **slow thinking**, also called System 2 thinking by researcher and Nobel Laureate Daniel Kahneman in his book *Thinking, Fast and Slow*. This type of thinking is deliberate and effortful, rather than impulsive and quick, and allows you to deeply concentrate on a big idea or concept.

There are many activities that could benefit from a slowed-down, handwritten approach, but in this guide, we're only focusing on three:

- Journaling about personal experiences
- Taking notes during a talk or meeting
- Brainstorming big ideas

1. Journaling About Personal Experiences

Journaling by hand is a great way to process recent experiences. There's a reason that so many of us turn to a diary when we experience a notable, memorable, or even challenging event: **writing about it helps us understand what happened and what we learned from it.**

Researchers DeLaura Hubbs and Charles Brand suggest that journaling can help individuals move through the 4 stages of experiential learning, allowing them to fully process life events and leave every experience with new insights. Here's a breakdown of the role of journaling in the experiential learning process:

- **Stage 1: Concrete Experience** — When you write about *what* happened, you are recording details about a concrete experience you went through, which encodes the memory a little deeper in your brain than before.

- **Stage 2: Reflective Observation** — When you write about how an event or experience *made you feel*, you are observing your own emotions from a distance. This widens your perspective and helps you make new observations that might have been unclear in the thick of the moment.
- **Stage 3: Abstract Conceptualization** — Once your memories about an event are on the page, you may start to notice patterns that you could not see before. For example, you might notice that every time you journal about work, your entries tend to be negative. *Why is that?* you might think. *What is causing me to feel stress at work?*
- **Stage 4: Active Experimentation** — Now that you're noticing new connections, you may feel empowered to *experiment and try something new*. For example, after noticing negativity in your entries about work, you may feel inspired to talk to your manager about lightening your workload, or to set boundaries with a co-worker who is causing stress. In this way, deep journaling can encourage small changes in behavior that have a big impact on your wellbeing.

Every time you journal about an event by hand, you are growing, learning, and accessing inner wisdom. The slow thinking that is activated by handwriting leads to deep thought, which helps you learn from your experiences and make helpful adjustments for the future.

Activity to Try: Hand-Write a Journal Entry About Your Day

At the end of a long day, set aside 5 or 10 minutes to journal by hand. Write about anything that comes to mind: what you did, what you felt, and what stood out to you about the day's experience. If you're feeling ambitious, try writing an entry down every night for one week. Then, at the end of the week, read back over your entries. What patterns do you notice? Are any similar experiences or emotions standing out to you?

Pro Tip: Having a special notebook that you keep by your bed can help you turn this exercise into a habit — check out [some of our beautiful, sustainable stationary options here!](#)

2. Taking Notes During a Talk or Meeting

Have you ever been in the audience of a keynote presentation and thought, *Wow, that was so powerful — I need to write that down*. Or, maybe during a team meeting, you hear your co-worker share a key piece of information, and you get the same feeling — *that's important! Let me write that down*. If so, you're not listening passively, letting the words go by — you're listening to take notes on big ideas. **You're listening to learn.**

When you listen to learn, your brain is working overtime. You are making decisions on the fly about which words are most important to capture, and which ones you can discard. Though it seems like this would be stressful for your brain, listening for main ideas often leads to deeper thinking, processing, and idea generation.

At this point, it's important to make a distinction between listening to learn and listening to transcribe. If you're focused on transcribing — capturing *all* of the information a speaker is sharing — you'll be distracted by perfection and, as a result, less engaged in the present moment. By trying to capture everything, you'll miss out on the spontaneous insights that occur when you hear, and write down, an especially powerful idea.

That's why handwritten notes are so powerful in a live talk or meeting — they allow you to jot down key points while staying focused on the person in front of you. Without a keyboard, you won't be tempted to capture everything the person is saying. Instead, you'll be actively listening, pencil at the ready, only jotting down the phrases or ideas that pack the most punch.

"As soon as we begin making notes, we are forced to discriminate, judge, and select," writes science journalist Annie Paul Murphy in her book *The Extended Mind*. "This more engaged mental activity leads us to process what we're observing more deeply and can also lead us to new thoughts. Our jottings build for us a series of ascending steps from which we can survey new vistas."

Murphy is describing **the power of handwritten notes to inspire new ideas**. When you write down key ideas, you're likely to come up with "side note" thoughts of your own, which means you're not just learning new material — you're actively engaging with it and bringing it to life.

Activity to Try: Take Handwritten Notes During Your Next Team Meeting

The next time you have a meeting with your team at work, try jotting down a few notes on a piece of paper. To keep up with the meeting, you'll likely only be able to jot down a few key ideas that stand out to you. Once the meeting is over, read back over your notes to see:

- Which ideas were most important to me?
- Which concepts resonated the most, and why?
- What's the most important idea I want to take away from this meeting?

3. Brainstorming Big Ideas

When you're thinking through a big question, it can be helpful to think (and write) in a non-linear way. The term "mind mapping" was coined in 1974 by educator Tony Buzan, and since then, a variety of visual brainstorming techniques have been created and shared by educators, business leaders, and thinkers **to inspire us to write and think in non-linear ways.**

Visual brainstorming techniques like mind mapping **are especially useful when you're trying to generate new ideas.** They help you tap into your "design mind," [as researcher Gabrielle Rico calls it](#), or what's commonly understood as the "right brain" characteristics of creativity and intuition.

While there are some great digital tools that recreate the experience of visual brainstorming online, pen-and-paper mind maps still have a few advantages:

- **Low Barrier to Entry** — Instead of spending time learning a new piece of software, pen and paper allows you to get started right away. This makes handwritten brainstorming especially useful when you're trying to come up with new ideas quickly, or for a one-time project.
- **Limitless Possibilities** — Even the best digital brainstorming tools come with limitations. You may not be able to type freely on the page, or you may have trouble drawing connections between text boxes. With pen and paper, the options are only as limited as your imagination. You can move about the page freely — drawing, writing and making connections as you wish, which keeps your thinking uninterrupted.

If you're working on a big task or problem — creating a new system for your workplace, contemplating your personal goals, or thinking through a big decision — **consider drawing it out to gain clarity, explore new connections, and generate new ideas.** All you need is an old-fashioned piece of paper and a pen.

Activity to Try: Set a New Goal with a Mind Map

If you're looking for a new challenge at work or in your personal life, get out a piece of paper and a pencil and try this exercise:

- In the center of the page, write "Possible Goals" and put a circle around it.
- Then, draw lines off the center circle that connect to various ideas for goals you could pursue.
- After you write down potential goals, draw lines off of each goal with "pros" and "cons" about pursuing it. Why would this goal be exciting for you to pursue? Why not?
- After you've done that, survey your entire mind map. Do you see any connections between the ideas you've written down? If so, draw lines connecting related ideas.

From here, you can take your visual mind map in any direction you want to go. You may see additional connections between your goals and decide to draw lines between them, or you may decide to start a new mind map to further clarify your thinking. **Whatever you decide, lean into creativity and make the blank page your own.**

At the end, review what you've written and see if you can walk away with one or two new goals for your personal or professional life.

When to Use Typing Instead

At this point, you may be wondering: Are there times when digital note-taking is better? Yes! **We believe a strong note-taking practice benefits from both handwritten notes and digital notes.** This is because they engage different parts of your brain. While handwriting encourages slow, contemplative thinking, digital note-taking encourages fast, more automatic thinking. In many cases, a combination of both slow and fast systems are needed when you're learning and creating.

Writing by hand is a slow system. Slow systems are meant to build your understanding: they encourage contemplation, critical thinking, and connection-building. When you are trying to slow down and understand something deeply, handwriting is one of the best tools at your disposal.

Typing, on the other hand, can be considered a fast system. Its goal is efficiency and quick, immediate results. A fast system can be helpful when you are attempting to capture a large amount of data, or when you need to quickly scan information at a surface level. For example, you may use a digital note-taking system to organize a large set of data points, or to complete routine writing tasks, like creating a meeting agenda, writing an email, or putting together a sales report.

When you're trying to decide between typing and writing by hand, consider this question: What is your goal? Are you focused on efficiency and results, or coming up with new connections and original ideas? If your desire is to get into a "deep thinking" mode and create new ideas, writing by hand is a great option.

Conclusion: Write by Hand to Learn and Grow

We live in a digital world. When our lives get busy, it's easy to forget the power of an original technology like writing by hand. Our hope is that this guide has helped you see the power of handwriting in a new way. Together, we've explored:

- The science behind writing by hand
- Why writing by hand helps you learn
- 3 activities that benefit from writing by hand:
 - Journaling about events
 - Taking notes during meetings
 - Brainstorming big ideas
- How to decide between typing and writing by hand

Even with all of its benefits, we know it may still be difficult to turn to handwriting when the convenience of a keyboard is at your fingertips. In spite of this, we wish you to leave this guide feeling inspired to pick up your real-life notebook for journaling, brainstorming, note-taking, and more — **for real-life writing**. Your journal is sitting there, waiting for you to express yourself on the page! Today, we hope you answer its call.

Thank you for learning with us, and happy journaling!

About nez living

nez living facilitates your intentional lifestyle by crafting sustainable stationery with [vegan materials](#) and [eco-friendly practices](#). At the same time, we safeguard [premium quality standards](#) and enhance your [wellbeing and productivity](#) in style.

To view our full line of notebooks, [visit our shop page](#).

Our Story

The story of nez living can be brought back to a moment in time **when founder Vanessa was searching for a new notebook. She was searching for a brand she could trust** — a brand with a story, a brand that had values aligning with her own, and a brand that understood the importance of providing a high-quality, lasting product. When she couldn't find a stationary brand that fit this description, she decided to make one of her own: and, after a winding entrepreneurial journey, **nez living was born!**

Our Values

nez living is a values-based company. We strive to deliver high-quality, long-lasting notebooks that are also kind to our planet. Our core company values include:

- Using vegan and eco-friendly materials
- Implementing sustainable practices to minimize waste
- Keeping our carbon footprint as low as possible
- Delivering premium quality by partnering with a small-scale family-run printer
- Creating timeless pieces with sophisticated design elements

Our motto: Timeless, professional, modern.

Learn More

To learn more about nez living and see our latest line of notebooks, [visit our website](#).

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