

What Should I Write About for My Visual Journal?

This list of suggested prompts has been culled from multiple sources and refined through my years of experience teaching visual journals. The idea is simple—read the prompts, set your timer for 10-15 minutes, and write for the entire time. Do not censor yourself or edit as you go—this writing is for your eyes only. If you keep your hands moving, you are less likely to stop. Allow your writing voice to flow in any direction the prompts takes you—the process is the most important thing, not the outcome. You can take these prompts in any order, repeat them, or create your own. They are simply a starting point—your writing will spill beyond these parameters. Remember that these writing sessions are the center of your visual journal practice. I highly recommend reading Natalie Goldberg’s “Writing Down the Bones” and Lynda Barry’s “What It Is” as you go through the prompts.



PROMPT #1 CHILDHOOD MEMORIES

Make a list of 5-10 toys you remember playing with as a child. Choose one you can remember with greater clarity and write down as many sensory details as possible about this specific object—what did it feel like in your hands, where did you play with it, with whom and when? Write down any feelings, smells, sights, sounds and tastes that emerge as you enter a particular memory about that toy. Think about who was there & how old you were in that memory. Where did you live? What do you remember about that place? ***Suggested visual materials & techniques to accompany this prompt: photo collage from family photos and watercolor/ink wash.***

PROMPT #2 PLACES AND SPACES

Make a list of 5-10 places or spaces you know very well (i.e. a room, a house, a beach, a street, a restaurant). Choose one space or place that you can remember in detail and describe the tastes, smells, sights, sounds and feelings associated with it. Write for the entire time, packing in as much detail as possible. This place or space can be one that you have a strong emotional reaction to, either positive or negative, or it can be something you encounter on your daily commute like a train car. Sensory detail is the key to unlocking this prompt, so try to **show (describe)** and not tell (explain) through your writing. ***Suggested visual materials & techniques to accompany this prompt: photo collage, watercolor/ink wash and stamped/printed textures.***

PROMPT #3 STORIES

Make a list of 5-10 family or personal stories you can recall. These would be stories that you have told yourself, or heard many times from family or friends. These can be stories that relate to your identity as a member of your family, even if they happened before you were born. They can be funny, sad, or even kind of mundane. They do not have to entertain or impress anyone, though they may be those kinds of “crazy” stories families share with each other. Choose one story to re-tell in your visual journal. Why is storytelling important in our lives? How is it different from other ways of remembering? What does it inform our sense of who we are? ***Suggested visual materials & techniques to accompany this prompt: photo collage, watercolor/ink wash, found materials, erasure poems.***

PROMPT #4 RELATIONSHIPS

Make a list of 5-10 people who were or are important in your life and consider how these relationships shaped your identity and sense of purpose. Which relationships seem most important to how you feel about yourself and the way you identify to

others? How do these relationships change over time? What happens to our sense of self when a relationship ends or goes through a difficult time? What types of relationships seem to last longest? You can use this prompt to examine past, present or future relationships. ***Suggested visual materials & techniques to accompany this prompt: photo collage, watercolor/ink wash, drawing, erasure poems.***

PROMPT #5 CREATIVITY

Make a list of 5-10 creative things that you absolutely love to do when you have time. These can be small or large, individual or collaborative—it doesn't matter, as long as these activities feel creative to you. Examples of daily creative activities include cooking, singing, playing an instrument, acting, playing sports or games, knitting, writing, taking photos, problem-solving, drawing, building stuff in your garage, arranging flowers and even just choosing what you wear. Consider these questions as you write: Do you make enough space for creativity in your life? Why or why not? How do you feel when you are not able to use your creativity? How do you define creativity & how do you feel others define it? Is it a way of thinking and making things or is it both? Is creativity necessary for feeling well-balanced? ***Suggested visual materials & techniques to accompany this prompt: everything and the kitchen sink! Experiment!***

PROMPT #6 THE SELF-PORTRAIT

Make a list of 5-10 self portraits by artists and/or autobiographies by writers. Then consider these questions: Why do you think humans create self-portraits and autobiographies? What is their role in self-development and in our society? Why are viewers & readers intrigued by them? Are they tools for self-discovery or self-creation? What is the difference? Is your social media presence a kind of self-portrait? Exploring the possibilities of making a self-portrait through writing and art with this prompt. ***Suggested visual materials & techniques to accompany this prompt: photo collage, watercolor/ink wash, drawing, painting and stamped/printed textures.***

PROMPT #7 FEAR

Make a list of 5-10 things you are afraid of from growing old to finding a spider in your house. To the side of each item, write a sentence or two about why you are afraid of it. Can you identify where this fear comes from? Consider these questions: How do you react to fear? Do you have coping mechanisms or ways to motivate yourself to push through difficult moments when fear takes over? If so, reflect on where you learned to deal with fear, frustration, stress and/or depression. For example, do you have role models who seem to cope well with these things? If so, how do they cope?

If not, how have you learned to cope without role models? Do you have support through your community, friends or family when you struggle with feeling afraid? ***Suggested visual materials & techniques to accompany this prompt: photo collage, watercolor/ink wash and erasures.***

PROMPT #8 THE FUTURE

Close your eyes and think about what might be possible in your life. What are your biggest hopes and dreams for the future? Writing them down can make them seem more real. If this is too much to start with, then make a list of 5-10 personal goals for the immediate future (from one week to 1 year from now). Where did these goals come from? Have you been working towards some of them for a while? Are others more recent? Take one goal from the list and examine it. Is this something you still want to achieve? If so, ask yourself why and how. Then identify one thing you could do today to move yourself towards that goal, no matter how small. You can repeat this process for each goal on the list. Also consider how your goals have shifted over time. ***Suggested visual materials & techniques to accompany this prompt: choose your favorites!***

Now that you have a visual journal practice, how can you better understand your process?

Gain a better understanding of your visual journal practice by thoughtfully responding to these questions. I suggest doing this weekly or after you create a new spread in your visual journal. This important part of the process can deepen your practice & strengthen your commitment.



1. **Describe how your daily timed writing sessions (10-15 minutes each).** What subjects have you been tackling in these writing sessions? Which things have been difficult to write about? Which have been joyful or exciting? Are you writing beyond your time or just waiting for the timer to go off? Are you keeping your hands moving the entire session or do you pause often? When you are writing, which topics make the time fly by and which ones feel difficult or sluggish?
2. **Which image-making techniques and design strategies have you incorporated into your journal recently?** What has been most successful or surprising? What has been challenging or frustrating? Which techniques or materials do you want to try next time? What kinds of materials are you most drawn to at the moment?

3. **What were you trying to communicate in your most recent spread?** What design choices did you make to communicate these ideas? (For example, which colors, textures, images and chunks of writing did you use?)
4. **How much time did you spend on your last visual journal spread?** Has this been enough to complete it? If you are struggling to find time for your journal, how can you rearrange your schedule to make time? What time of day or evening seems to work best for you? Have you found one reoccurring time to journal or have you been journaling whenever you find the time?*
5. **How do you feel about your emerging visual journal practice right now?**

**To keep your visual journal practice going, consider sharing your progress with others on a regular basis. This connection forms a sense of community which makes you more likely to keep going and helps you learn from others along the way.*