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## Keeping a Personal Journal

### Introduction

A journal is not the same as a diary and not quite the same as a log book, though it has many aspects in common with both. Here, what we mean by a journal is a book in which you write regularly in order to keep track of your ideas and to create a reflective record that you can go back and re-read as your ideas take you off in new directions.

Keeping a journal is an important part of being a researcher, as important as the 'public face' of research in reports and papers, and it is in writing your journal that you will develop your own understanding of the ideas and methods that we will discuss in the module. Journal writing is a vital habit to cultivate, and you will find that keeping a project journal is invaluable in managing any research project because it will help you to remember what happens and what is important. Also, as your project develops, your ideas will change and often you will not realise how you have made critical decisions until much later. A good journal provides you with a record of what you were thinking at the time, with what seemed most important and with the way decisions appeared to you as you became aware of the need to make them.

You can use a computer for keeping the journal, but many people prefer to handwrite the journal in a book set aside for this purpose. Whichever method you chose, make sure you date each entry, and if you are using a book, leave plenty of spaces on each page (and wide margins) so that you can add further comments at a later date.

If you want to use a computer you can use a word processing application but you might also think about using more specialist software, for example, a note-making application like 'Storyspace' (for PC users) or 'Tinderbox' (for the Mac) (both can be found at <http://eastgate.com>) or, a weblog application like Typepad, which can manage photos as well as text (which you can obtain from <http://www.typepad.org>, if you are interested to see an example you can check my research journal at <http://www.icare.typepad.com>).

Keeping a research journal is not the same as taking notes from a lecture or seminar or from reading a book. It may **include** taking notes but it is primarily a way of thinking about what you are doing, a means of tracking your own ideas as you learn, a way of giving direction, shape and purpose to your study. You will probably find that your journal contains lots of questions too, as well as diagrams and sketches.

In making the claim that keeping a journal is an essential research tool, I am making the assumption that writing in the many forms you might use it in a

journal, is inextricably related to thinking. It may include making a record of salient facts, ideas and sources but it will also involve you in developing critical thinking about your own actions and ideas, in reflection, imagination and strategic planning. Your journal should be both a record and a source for you in doing research. It is a way of helping you think about how you think, and learning how you learn.