

UNITED WISDOM

An Observation Journal: Recording Experience Without a Final Verdict

The Person and the Inner World

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Epigraph

> *“I paint its passage.” — Michel de Montaigne, Essays, III.II, Of Repentance. Short fragment from Charles Cotton’s English translation, edited by William Carew Hazlitt,1877; display capitalisation only.*

What this article is about

After an unpleasant conversation, a brief line appears in a journal: nothing worked out again. At the time of writing, it seems an accurate conclusion. A week later, it is difficult to recall which question remained unanswered, what was said and what the person expected from the meeting. The general verdict, however, has survived very well. A note intended to help understand experience has become another piece of evidence against oneself. Replacing it with a positive statement may seem appealing, but the particular episode will again disappear behind an assessment. Another approach is to retain enough detail to return to the event without having to explain your entire life now.

Imagine a fictional example. Alina intended to ask about a task’s deadline during a work meeting. When an opportunity appeared, she remained silent; that evening, she wrote that she never knew how to speak at the right moment. Later, she remembered that the question had already been partly discussed, though no exact date had been given. Later still, she found a draft containing several versions of her question. These details do not make her initial disappointment unreal. They change the scope of the conclusion: one question went unasked in one episode, and that moment can now be examined more closely. The general verdict extends beyond what is actually known.

Here, an observation journal means a private note preserving a connection among an event, what the person noticed and when it was written down. Its purpose is to support later examination of one episode. It need not cover every day, establish a memory’s objectivity or end in a moral conclusion. You can write briefly, use approximate terms and leave space where information is missing. This article offers a simple editorial approach: distinguish an initial account from a later addition and limit a conclusion to the material it actually concerns.

I. A note begins with a selected episode

Rather than trying to describe a whole day, choose a small, bounded part: the moment before a question, a conversation after a meeting, waiting for a reply or an action you performed differently. Its beginning and ending are easier to identify. This does not mean the experience must be insignificant. Limiting the scope prevents several different events from immediately becoming one conclusion. If fatigue arose in the morning, a conversation happened at midday and plans fell through in the evening, the note can concern only the conversation. Other circumstances can be included as context without automatically being established causes. Choosing a boundary makes the journal's question easier to revisit.

Alina can begin by noting that she wanted to clarify a deadline during the meeting but did not ask before the topic changed. This wording neither excuses nor accuses her. It preserves the subject for examination. She can now ask when the question arose, what she imagined a suitable moment would be and what happened between intention and silence. No deep explanation is required immediately. Even if the answer remains unclear, the note already differs from a general claim of being unable to speak. It contains an event to which new information can be added. A broad label rarely indicates which particular part of experience needs further attention.

An episode's boundary can be approximate. When the precise time is unknown, a part of the day or its position relative to another event is enough. Honest approximation is more useful than invented precision. You need not reconstruct every reply or take notes during a conversation if that interferes with participation. A later note remains usable when its basis in recollection is clear. You can also choose another episode if the present one is too painful or needs support. A journal does not require returning to difficult events for completeness. Its scope should match the available capacity to consider the selected part of life calmly.

II. An event's time differs from a note's time

The date at the top of a page usually looks straightforward but may refer to different things. An event happened yesterday, was recorded today and received an addition a week later. If these moments merge, a later explanation can easily be perceived as something already understood during the event. It helps, therefore, to distinguish at least the episode's time from the note's time. A minute-by-minute chronology is unnecessary. Two simple markers preserve an important difference: when the described event happened and when this account emerged. The journal then becomes a sequence of information available at each stage rather than one story apparently known in full from the beginning.

Alina's evening note reflects her state after the meeting. It is not a direct record of a thought during her silence, however convincing it feels. Several days later, another understanding of

the episode may emerge. It may be more accurate in one respect while reflecting a new mood in another. Dates do not decide which account is true. They help prevent one from silently replacing another. On rereading, she can see the course of examination: first, she knew about an unasked question; then she recalled the discussion; later, she found a draft. That course is itself part of the experience.

At the beginning of *Of Repentance*, Montaigne describes himself with attention to change and the moment of consideration. His text allows differences among successive self-descriptions and preserves the exploratory character of his writing. This is a philosophical and literary position rather than a developed journaling protocol. Selected opening passages were read here, not the entire *Essays*. Their limited relevance is that description concerns a person in changing circumstances and need not become a fixed final model. This comparison requires neither accepting all Montaigne's moral judgments nor treating every contradiction as reliable simply because it has been recorded.

III. What is preserved, and what is reconstructed?

One note can contain different kinds of material. There may be a message you sent that can be checked, an approximately recalled sequence of conversation, an experience you notice now and a proposed reason for silence. All may matter, but their availability differs. Ordinary words can mark this difference: I can see this in my note, I remember approximately, I now suppose, I cannot reconstruct. These markers do not make the journal a complex protocol. They prevent a later reader from taking a supposition as a preserved detail. Most often, that reader will be the same person some time later.

Not every recollection needs checking against an external document. A personal note can preserve a subjective experience that has no independent confirmation. Alina can write that she felt disappointed that evening without proving her disappointment to anyone. If she says she thought a particular phrase during the meeting, however, it matters whether this is recollection or a present explanation. Both can remain: I approximately remember such a thought; I now suppose it may have interfered. This distinction does not devalue inner experience. It clarifies how far certainty about a particular detail extends and allows the unknown to remain unestablished.

The abstract of Daniel Schacter's updated review, published online in 2021 and in a 2022 journal issue, describes memory as constructive, serving important functions while remaining vulnerable to error. The indexed abstract was read here rather than the full review materials. It establishes neither that any particular memory of Alina's is false nor that a journal corrects memory. Its limited role is to encourage attention to the material's character. A note is also created by a person under particular conditions. Writing it down does not make its details infallible. Nor does memory's fallibility require rejecting everything retained.

IV. An experience can be named without defining a person

Words about an experience often quietly become descriptions of the whole person. Speaking was difficult in one episode, so I am cowardly; irritation followed a meeting, so I am argumentative. This transition can seem natural because a general label is short and recognisable. Yet it adds a large conclusion for which the note may provide no basis. The experience can stay at the scale of the episode: at that moment, I wanted to postpone the question; disappointment appeared after the meeting; I now struggle to find a name for it. The perfect word is unnecessary. It is enough not to present one response to a situation as an exhaustive definition of yourself.

This distinction does not require replacing an unpleasant description with a pleasant one. If Alina disliked what she did, the note can retain that dissatisfaction directly. The question is not how to make a journal kind at any price, but what she is assessing. An unasked question, a lack of preparation and how she treated herself afterwards are different subjects. They can be examined separately even if connected. Such a note preserves the possibility of a particular change. A question might be shortened next time, or a deadline clarified through another available route. A general label does not reveal that choice and often makes it harder to distinguish.

Sometimes an evaluative word is already written and vividly expresses that evening’s state. It need not be erased. You can add that it was an initial assessment after the meeting and then name the event it concerns. The journal thus retains how you related to yourself as well. That too is observable material for a later conversation, if one is wanted. The word should not automatically become a confirmed characteristic merely through rereading. A note can contain strong emotion and a boundary at the same time: this wording reflected my view then; its wider meaning has not been established.

V. An explanation can remain a hypothesis

After describing an event, you want to understand its cause: why did I remain silent, answer sharply or miss an opportunity? An explanation helps connect an event with other information. The first available explanation, however, need not be the last. Alina may suppose that she feared appearing unprepared, had not formulated her question in time or thought the topic was already closed. She can retain one plausible hypothesis and indicate what supports it. If there is no basis yet, that can also be noted. Every imaginable alternative need not be listed to permit a hypothesis. What matters is not making the supposition the episode’s only fact.

A hypothesis becomes more useful when it permits an understandable clarification. What would distinguish it from another explanation? A personal draft may show whether the question was formulated beforehand. An available work record may clarify when the subject

changed. Perhaps nothing more can be established, and describing the action will suffice. There is no need to test another person, collect others' information or require colleagues to reconstruct everything for a private journal. A hypothesis can remain open. Its value lies in directing the next question rather than immediately filling every gap in a causal account.

Uncertainty about a cause does not cancel an available action. The task's deadline can still be clarified through an agreed work channel. Alina need not fully understand the origin of her silence first. A note can end with two different lines: the cause remains unclear; the practical question needs an answer. This preserves a useful boundary between self-examination and necessary action. In more serious circumstances, help and protection should likewise not depend on a complete personal theory of causes. A journal can prepare a description for a conversation without becoming a condition that must be met before a person permits themselves to act.

VI. An addition does not rewrite past knowledge

When a new detail appears, tidying the old note is tempting: remove the inaccurate phrase and replace it with the latest explanation. This is understandable for readability. Yet the difference between what was known immediately and what became known later then disappears. In an observation journal, a separate, dated paragraph can help. It may clarify a detail, abandon an earlier hypothesis or note a new doubt. Every typing error need not be preserved. What matters is retaining a change of meaning when it matters to the episode. You can then see both the updated account and how you reached it.

Alina adds that she found a draft containing several versions of her question. This weakens the explanation that she was entirely unprepared, but does not establish the precise cause of her silence. The next line can name what changed: the question was considered beforehand; the moment of presenting it remains unclear. The earlier disappointment remains a past experience while its general verdict is limited. An addition should not declare all previous feelings mistaken. New information can change an understanding of circumstances without cancelling what the person experienced after the meeting. Naming what is being revised prevents correcting one detail from turning into denial of the entire episode.

If a detail is recalled uncertainly, the addition can say precisely that. A week later, it seems to me another question came first, but I have no confirmation. For honest observation, this is no weaker than a confident reconstruction. It preserves the limit of what is known. If wanted, a brief current summary can sit beside the earlier accounts, clearly dated. Reading is then convenient while the origins of conclusions remain visible. This is particularly useful when preparing a note for a conversation with a chosen person. The complete history need not be shared: you decide which parts serve the particular purpose.

VII. Repetition needs comparable details

Several notes ending in the same verdict can create an impression of a stable pattern. If each says only that things went wrong again, it is difficult to know whether the same event recurred. In one case, a question went unasked; in another, an answer arrived but was unwelcome; in a third, a conversation was postponed. Similar disappointment may unite different episodes. To examine repetition, compare particular features: what the person wanted to do, what action occurred and what remained unresolved. This requires no statistical study of your personality. A few comparable details help examine whether one recurring part has actually been noticed.

A journal may mainly receive conspicuous difficulties. A calm meeting in which a question was asked on time may never earn a line. The absence of successful episodes from notes therefore does not mean they were absent from life. When examining a recurrence, an available contrasting example can be recalled and described just as specifically. No positive balance need be sought or proof that everything is fine produced. A contrast helps when it clarifies conditions: the question was prepared in one sentence, the meeting allowed separate time for questions or there was less haste. It expands the material for consideration without cancelling difficult cases.

A conclusion about recurrence can also remain limited. *In several recorded work meetings, choosing a moment to ask was difficult* is more precise than *I can never communicate*. Such a conclusion makes it easier to choose a subject for further work or conversation. Perhaps the meeting format, preparation or an available channel for questions afterwards could be clarified. Observed similarity, however, does not automatically establish the same cause. Different circumstances can lead to similar actions. A journal helps identify a question worth examining rather than having to prove a complete pattern by itself. If comparison grows unwieldy and stops helping, one particular episode can be enough.

VIII. Examination need not become a daily trial

A journal can easily become a compulsory daily inspection: was I attentive enough, did I feel correctly, did I improve? A missed note then looks like misconduct and an ordinary evening like insufficient material. Observation requires no such regime. You can write only when there is a particular question and an opportunity to revisit it. You can leave gaps, use short notes or choose a conversation instead. Consistency is determined by the task rather than the length of an unbroken streak. A journal serves a person when it makes material easier to work with, rather than demanding daily proof of taking oneself seriously.

In the selected passage of Plato’s *Apology*, Socrates connects examining himself and others with discussion of virtue within his defence speech. This is a philosophical text representing Socrates rather than an established historical transcript. Its subject extends beyond personal

journals. The comparison here concerns a willingness to consider one’s life, without transferring a severe judgment to someone who keeps no journal or cannot reflect now. The passage establishes no universal duty of self-observation and no basis for declaring another life less worthy. A contemporary private note remains voluntary.

When writing increases unpleasant tension, interferes with rest or repeatedly draws you back to a painful episode without available clarification, you can reduce it or stop. You need not prove that journals harm everyone to decline a method that does not fit you. If support is needed, it can be discussed with a suitable professional or a chosen, trusted person. The complete text need not be disclosed. Naming the difficulty and the help wanted is enough to begin. A personal practice should not become an examination whose successful completion supposedly earns the right to care and conversation.

IX. A short note you can revisit

For a small, voluntary trial, choose an ordinary, safe episode requiring neither reconstruction of traumatic events nor a medical or legal decision. First, indicate approximately when it happened and when the note is being made. Then write a few sentences about what you wanted to do, what happened and what you noticed in your response. Separately mark any hypothesis and any unknown where information is lacking. This is a convenient editorial format rather than a verified therapeutic method. It can be simplified, replaced with a drawing bearing clear markers or cancelled. No difficult situation needs to be created to give the journal substance.

Alina’s note might retain a morning meeting, an evening entry, an intention to clarify a deadline, a topic change before her question and disappointment afterwards. It could then include an approximate memory of waiting for a suitable moment, a hypothesis about an unfinished formulation and an unknown precise sequence of discussion. The words can be her own and very brief. Colleagues’ names, others’ personal information and exact replies that are not remembered are unnecessary. A small format preserves enough material for a question. The note itself still does not confirm its causal hypothesis: that status remains visible even when the explanation looks convincing and is fluently phrased.

If another detail appears later, it can be added with a date and one sentence saying what it changes. If none appears, the note can remain unfinished. On returning to it, asking whether the material clarifies a next question or available action is enough. Perhaps the event no longer needs further examination. Then no conclusion is required merely to close the page. A personal note is not official documentation of important circumstances and does not replace professional handling of them. For its modest purpose, it is sufficient when it distinguishes what is known, what is supposed and where there is no answer yet.

X. A note preserves the possibility of revision

An observation journal promises no final revelation of a person. It preserves small portions of experience so they can be revisited with a new question. That is why it allows dates, approximation, successive accounts and limited conclusions. These are not ornaments in a tidy text. They show how a statement connects with its material and the time it appeared. When that connection is visible, a strong initial assessment need not define the event's meaning forever. It can be considered alongside other information and distinguished from what is actually supported. Revision respects lived experience without making its earlier explanation untouchable.

Revision need not continue indefinitely. Sometimes the material allows a sufficiently clear action; sometimes no further information will arrive. Examination can end with a note about the limit of knowledge, followed by a return to ordinary life. An incomplete causal history does not make the note useless. Perhaps it only limited a broad label to one episode or revealed that the present explanation emerged later. That is already a particular distinction. It may support a more precise question without requiring every page to prove development. A person can use a journal irregularly and leave it when another method is more convenient.

Alina need not conclude that she will now always speak at the right moment. Her result is more modest: a deadline question went unasked at one meeting; preparation existed; the cause of this particular silence is not fully established; clarifying the deadline remains possible. Instead of a final definition of her personality, there is a note she can work with. It preserves both evening disappointment and a later addition without merging them into earlier knowledge. Such a journal does not become a judge. It remains a place where experience gains distinguishable details and a person can choose the next question without first having to pronounce a final verdict on themselves.

What this means in practice

Choose one ordinary, safe episode and distinguish the event's time from the note's time. Retain an intention, the action that occurred and your noticed response. Use approximate markers where precise information is unavailable. An experience can be named directly without defining an entire personality. Mark an explanation as a hypothesis and indicate its available basis. If a clarification appears later, add it separately with a date so that new understanding does not look like knowledge already available then. A few sentences suffice; neither daily entries nor literary quality is compulsory.

On rereading, compare particular details rather than identical evaluative conclusions alone. Preservation makes neither a note infallible nor a whole-life pattern established. Its usefulness can be judged by whether it clarifies a question or available action. The personal trial is

voluntary, private and can be stopped. There is no need to reconstruct painful events, test others or postpone needed help until an explanation is complete. Important medical and legal circumstances require suitable professional handling. A journal retains its limited subject: one experience, a visible boundary of information and the right to add to an earlier account.

Key quotation

> *“Examining myself.” — Plato, Apology, selected passage of Socrates’ speech, traditionally located38a; short fragment from Benjamin Jowett’s translation, display capitalisation only. It concerns examination of life and virtue rather than compulsory daily writing.*

Connections between traditions

• **Montaigne, EssaysIII.II:** self-description through change and time; a limited philosophical perspective on successive accounts, without claiming verified journaling effectiveness.

• **Plato, Apology:** examination of life and virtue within a defence speech. Neither a universal duty to journal nor a judgment on the worth of people without this practice.

• **Contemporary memory review:** constructive memory, important functions and possible error. A limited context, not proof that a particular recollection is false or that writing is therapeutic.

• **Editorial approach:** an event, a note’s time, a hypothesis’s status and a separate addition. Comparing perspectives makes them neither one doctrine nor a single experimental result.

Sources

1. Michel de Montaigne. *Essays*, III.II, *Of Repentance*, selected opening. Charles Cotton, translator; William Carew Hazlitt, editor,1877. Project Gutenberg3600, current edition. Selected opening passages and metadata were read, not the entire essay or book. The current page gives release26October2004/update16March2023; an older file’s different release date does not replace this edition. A global reuse licence was not established; source text is neither imported nor vectorised.

2. Plato. *Apology*, selected passage traditionally located38a. Benjamin Jowett, translator. Project Gutenberg1656. Selected passage, nearby context and metadata were read, not the entire dialogue; translator introduction distinguished from represented speech. Socrates’ exact historical words are not established. Digital-edition rights UNKNOWN; source text is neither imported nor vectorised.

3. Daniel L.Schacter. *The seven sins of memory: an update*. Memory2022;30(1):37–42, online17January2021. DOI10.1080/09658211.2021.1873391, PubMed33459149. Complete indexed author abstract and metadata were read; full review and data remain unread. Direct PubMed opening returned no substantive text; an indexed result is not presented as the full paper. An article-specific reuse licence was not established; source abstract is not imported, vectorised or used for training.

Tags

journal, observation, recording experience, event, time, date, account, addition, revision, hypothesis, uncertainty, detail, context, recollection, limits of knowledge, self-description, experience, assessment, label, question, action, repetition, comparison, private writing, voluntary practice, boundaries, Montaigne, Plato, Socrates, memory, self-examination, self-respect

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