



Past, Present and Future

A self-help tool

Introduction

Careers are all about stories. Where we started out, what degree we did, the job we got and what happened afterwards. As it has been famously said, people are ‘meaning making machines’ (Frankly, 1946). We use these stories to join the dots up and create patterns that make sense of events to us. They can also help us think about what might come next. What new chapter in your life story will you write?

This self-help tool asks you to spend a few minutes writing about yourself and your educational / work career. It draws on a growing body of practice into the power of writing to promote personal growth, emotional awareness and to help people through challenging situations (Ackerman, 2017).

This tool is designed to...

- Help you see how your life story has unfolded.
- Make sense of events and gain a more positive view of your life.
- Consider how your careers ideas might fit into your future.

Consider using this tool if you...

- Like using reflective / creative approaches to learning and personal development.
- Want to see if your career plans make sense in relation to your life-story.
- Feel that you need to process your past or present situation to move on with your career.

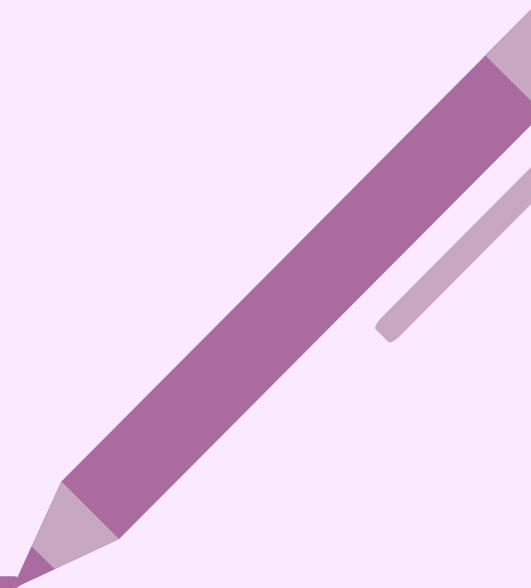



How to use this tool

First, decide how you want to capture your thoughts.

Choose a way that works for you. Perhaps you have a special notebook, or prefer to use Word. Decide when you will do your writing and for how long. It is recommended that you write for 5-15 minutes continuously (so try to go straight through without breaks) on at least 4 occasions (each a day or week apart).

We'd recommend that you aim to write fairly quickly, on your first go, and not try to edit or control what you say. Rather, just let it flow and jot it down as it comes. This is because it helps if the meaning of things you are writing haven't been set in stone and is still flexible (Haidt, 2006, p. 148). You will find yourself naturally taking a more considered approach that untangles the meaning of events when you come back to your writing on other occasions later.





For this tool we've suggested you take the title 'Past, Present and Future' (through we've given other ideas towards the end of this document). The title is deliberately open ended, so it's up to you how to respond to it.


Here are some other topics that you could use to write about your life and careers:

- 10 different careers I could do in the future.
- 10 different places I could live and work.
- 10 different paths my life could take.
- People who could help me on my career journey.
- A difficult time in my educational / work career.
- An important choice I made in my educational / work career.
- A time in my educational / work career when things went wrong.
- Times when I've been surprised at how resourceful I am.
- Times when I've made myself proud.
- Times when I've turned things around.

Third, use Adam's 'WRITE' approach (cited in Ackerman, 2017).

- W** What do you want to write about? Name it.
- R** Review or reflect on your topic. Close your eyes, take deep breaths, and focus.
- I** Investigate your thoughts and feelings. Just start writing and keep writing.
- T** Time yourself. Write for five to 15 minutes straight.
- E** Exit "smart" by re-reading what you've written and reflecting on it with one or two sentences

Don't get hung up on spelling, grammar or how 'well' or profoundly you express things. Especially on the first time, let your ideas and feelings flow as a stream of consciousness.



On the following occasions, start afresh but on the same topic. You are likely to cover similar ground and may repeat yourself. Don't worry, this is fine. The experience of revisiting the same issues and events, gives your mind the chance to re-work the themes, examine them from slightly different angles and find new and better patterns.

- What common themes can you see emerging?
- What strengths can you see you've used?
- What positives can you find in difficult experiences?
- What life lessons have you learnt?
- How might you re-write the next chapter of your life?



Pause, Reflect, Act

- What would a kind and wise friend say about what you have written?
- What careers feature in your future?
- How do they flow from your present?
- Do they seem a natural development, or will you need to change to bring them about?
- Does your future feel like a positive step in the right direction? If not, how could you change your story?
- What are the key insights you've taken from this self-help guide?
- What actions do you need to take now to build on this exercise?
- Who could help you with this?
- Are there other related self-help tools you'd like to use as well?

As this sort of reflective writing can bring up deep feelings, if you need to discuss anything you can book an appointment with someone in the Careers Team, or Wellbeing (while you are a student).

NB: Because everyone is different and no one solution on its own is necessarily a magic bullet, please look at our other self-help tools as well and use the ones that work best for you.

References and Resources

- Ackerman, C. E. (2017, 26 October). *Writing Therapy: How to Write and Journal Therapeutically*. Positive Psychology. <https://positivepsychology.com/writing-therapy/>
- Frankl, V. E. (1946, reprinted 2004). *Man's Search for Meaning*. Rider / Penguin.
- Haidt, J. (2006). *The Happiness Hypothesis*. Arrow Books.
- McAdams, D. (2001). The psychology of life stories. *Review of General Psychology*, 5(2), 100–122.
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If you are a member of staff from another educational organisation and want to use a limited number of our self-help tools with your students, we'd love to hear from you and share good practice. We'd ask that you retain references to University of Huddersfield as a matter of courtesy and acknowledge the other sources we've used. Thank you.