



173: How to Journal Using One Word

I'm Emily P. Freeman, and welcome to the Next Right Thing. You're listening to Episode 173.

This is a podcast about making decisions, but also about making a life. If you struggle with decision fatigue, chronic hesitation, or if you just need a few minutes away from the constant stream of information and the sometimes delightful, but also distracting hum of entertainment, you're in the right place for a simple next right step.

Before we get started, though, I'd like to tell you about this episode's sponsor, Ritual. We talk about rhythms and routines often here on the Next Right Thing. One morning routine I'm excited about starting is taking a multivitamin. I have tried in years past to take my vitamins, but I always fizzle out, either because they've been too bulky to get down, or made me feel sick if I didn't take them at the exact right time after breakfast.

Luckily, Ritual is here to save the day. Ritual's clean, vegan-friendly multivitamin is formulated with high-quality nutrients in bioavailable forms your body can actually use. That means a delayed-release capsule that gets vitamin D, B12, iron, magnesium and more where you need them most without being hard on your body. Plus, the capsules are essenced with mint so the whole experience feels fresh. Ritual is the multivitamin re-imagined, and they've made it easy to integrate into your routine. My Ritual Essentials for Women are delivered to my door every month with free shipping, and I love that they offer the option to snooze or cancel subscriptions whenever you want.

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Now on to today's episode. Listen in.

Today, I want to share a simple way to journal for those of you who may wish to incorporate a journaling practice into your life rhythm, but don't know where to begin, or even if you already have a journaling practice that you depend on, but you want more tools and ideas to freshen it up. Either way, we're going to use one word as the center for everything.

I haven't always been a word-of-the-year person. I found it to be odd in years past to commit to just one

word for the whole year. There are so many great words, y'all. I love words.

But then in the middle of 2017, something interesting happened. A certain word found me. I may have missed it if not for my regular practice of reflection that helps me name patterns over time. But the word that found me back then in 2017 was the word collaborate. I was finding it everywhere, both the actual word, but also in my relationships and opportunities that were coming my way. I actually share more about that way back on Episode 49. It's titled simply Collaborate. I dare you not to be seeing Vanilla Ice all day now. You're welcome, and I'm extremely sorry.

But having that word helped me connect the dots of something. It was something I was learning, something that was challenging me and something I wanted to grow in and maybe not be so afraid of. Ever since then I've been more intentional about choosing a word for the year. I never force it. I try not to make it too super fancy, but I work to pay attention. And since reflection is just a regular normal part of my rhythm, choosing a word never really feels like a surprise. I always see it coming.

So how can we use one word to help create a journaling practice? I'm going to give you three steps, and this first step has several parts, so hang with me. But step one is really simple. Pick a word. Now, if you chose a word at the beginning of the year, you can move on to step two, but hang tight and we'll get to that in a minute.

If you didn't choose a word at the beginning of the year, let's pause for a moment and choose one now because, remember, your soul doesn't know the date. If you want to choose a word for the year in April, you go right ahead. You're allowed to do it. You don't have to wait until December or January to start at the very beginning of the year. Not only that, picking a word for a whole year feels like a lot of pressure or seems extra dramatic for your life right now. No sweat. Pick a word for the month, or you could pick a word for the week or you know what I'm about to say, you could pick a word for the day.

So let's release ourselves from weird boundaries that don't really matter and that might even be keeping us stuck. Let's practice beginning again and making a confident decision and not overthinking this word thing. There is 0% of a wrong way to do this. There's only a right way. There's just picking a word.

So here are a few questions or thoughts or activities to consider as you choose a word for the day or for the week or for the month, or even for the whole year. As a reminder, we are still in step one of the journal with one-word process, but there are a couple of parts.

So if you haven't chosen a word yet, first thing to do, start with your life-giving and life-draining list. I call this our life energy list. I always start here. If you want to, you can set a timer and make a list. If you are new to this practice, starting with what is life-draining right now? What is draining the energy in life from you right now in your life? Then the second list is what is life-giving? This helps you remember your right-now life and what activities, commitments, experiences and practices that you might want more of and, in turn, which ones you might want less of.

As you look at your two lists, ask yourself the question, are there any themes that stand out? Maybe you recognize your schedule is way too full and it's crowding out rest, play, creativity. Maybe you see how many times lunch with friends or family shows up on your life-giving list and you realize, wow, I would really like to cultivate more connection with people. So that's the first part, make those two lists.

As you look at them, the next part is, write down words or phrases that summarize the themes that stand out from your life energy list. What's life-giving? What's life draining? From the examples I listed before, it could be themes of rest, play, creativity, connection, or relating. Make a long list of words and phrases.

Then when you're finished, pick one. That's right. I just said, you just pick one. You don't have to wait for some big a-ha moment. Starting with the life energy list ensures that you're paying attention to what is life-giving and draining right now. So ask yourself the question, what do I want more of? What do I want less of? And then choose your word accordingly.

Now, again, this word does not have to be your forever word through the rest of the year. This could just be a word you want to hang on to for the next seven days. It's just that simple. So that's step one, choose a word.

Step two. Now that you have a word, it's time to journal. Yay. I love journaling. But even if you don't, this can still work for you. Here's what you do. You write your word at the top of your paper, and then take a few minutes to look back. Of course, we are. This is what I'm all about, looking back before we move forward. You could choose any length of time from one week to three months. Since we're kind of in between months right now when this episode drops, we're at the end of a quarter so I do this as part of my quarterly reflection. I'll look back over the last 90 days or the last three months. So, because I know that y'all like some examples, I wanted to share with you how I have incorporated this one-word journaling practice into my own rhythm.

So after doing some of the work that I described to you in step one, I did that back in December to choose my word, I did choose a word of the year this year, but again, there's no wrong. You can just choose a word for a short amount of time. But I determined this year that the word that I'm really drawn to and wanting to carry with me is the word clear.

A few weeks ago, I wrote my word at the top of a page in my journal. So this was after about three months of having been carrying and paying attention to this word clear in my life. So just a few weeks ago, after 90 days or so of having that word, I wrote the word clear the top of my page in my journal, and then I looked back through my iPhone photos. I flipped through my morning journal. I looked back through my daily planner. In all of those looking backs, I reminded myself what the last three months have held for me, for our family, for our community and even for the world.

Then I wrote down things I noticed, bullet-point style, in my journal, all the ways in which a theme of clear or clearing has come up. So here are a few examples. In January, we cleared out every shelf, cabinet and corner of our kitchen to prepare for a remodel. That kitchen was lovely. It was fine. It was old. It held over 12 years' worth of memories since we lived in our house, memories of breakfasts and lunches, dinners, holidays, birthdays, arguments, late-night snacks and Christmas cinnamon rolls. Because I'd already chosen my word for the year by that point, I was more mindful of the symbolism of clearing that space at the beginning of the year. But even if I had chosen the word later, I could look back and reflect and see that theme of clearing emerging.

Later in January, we released *The Next Right Thing Guided Journal*. Actually, now that I think of it, it might've even been that same week. Well, at the warehouse at my publishing house, that warehouse was

literally cleared out of copies. All the copies were sold, and we had to wait to have new ones printed.

This was another literal example of clearing, but having a word helped me to see it, to be thankful for what that clearing represented, even though it honestly caused a lot of headaches for me, for my publisher and for you, the readers, not having books available at the right time or when we wanted them. But because I had chosen the word clear, because I was noticing themes, I was like, “Look at that. What a gift I’m so grateful for that we sold enough books to clear out the warehouse. And even though it was trouble, there’s a gift in that.”

Another example, this quarter, I started meeting with a few friends who are also authors. I mentioned that in last week’s episode, this was less of a literal clearing, like clearing the space, and more of a clear next step for me, after over a year of clearing what felt like the opposite, which was a fog of loneliness in my work.

If you missed me walking through the process of making that decision, you can listen to it in the last episode called Make These Two Lists Now about Questions and Arrows. So if you’ve been wondering more about how do I follow arrows and what does that even mean, that’s Episode 172.

If you see there, those are just three very small examples that I just kind of jotted down in my journal under the word clear, some literal examples of how my word of the year was showing up in my life and in things that were happening, and also some more thoughtful or relational examples or examples that related to my work that I wanted to write down because all of these ways of clearing or finding clarity was meaningful for me. It’s something that I want. It’s something that I long for, which is why this word clear is something that I’ve been carrying and want to carry purposefully into this year.

Now, if you just decided a word to focus on today, then this journaling practice still works. You don’t have to notice it as you go along, although that’s one way to do it. All you have to do is take your word, write it at the top of the paper, just like I did, and then reflect on the last seven, 30 or even 90 days, the same as I did, and then write down places, figuratively or literally, where that word or theme revealed itself to you in your life upon reflection. Chances are, you already know, because the way you determined your word was based on your life energy list and what you wanted more or less of. So those themes have already revealed themselves to you in your life and paying attention, again, this is a practice of paying attention to your actual life, can show you themes or things that you are actually learning, dots that might be connected.

I don’t know about you, but there are times when I’m maybe not living quite as aware or paying attention. Then I go back and I read my journal, I realize, oh my goodness, I have been learning the same lessons, I have been struggling with the same things over and over again, month after month after month. In some ways that’s human and it’s normal and natural, but in other ways, there’s some ways in which I sometimes wonder if I were to be more intentional with my reflection, I wonder if I could connect some of these dots sooner and maybe even save myself a little bit of heartache.

That leads us to step three, which is pay attention. Now that you have a word, now that you know a little simple journaling practice to reflect and to jot down ways in which that word is showing up in your actual life, you can carry it with you into your next right thing. It can become for you a grounding intention to help you stay present and aware.

Now, I know what you might be wondering. “Emily, I just picked a random word. How is there meaning in this?” Do you not know how personal God is? Do you not know that God can work through anything? Can lead, invite and show up in any way at any time through any old random word? That’s not to say that everything has a big reason, or that everything has an explanation or a double secret meeting. But it is to say that as you pay attention to your life and as you choose a word that means something to you to carry, it’s because you’ve noticed a theme. You are a person with a mind, a heart, a will and an emotion. You have something you want more of and you have given it a name. That is not random.

Now that you have a word, you and your friend, Jesus, can discover ways that word can help to form you even more into the person you’re becoming. You can use this word to look back, or as you move forward. You can write it down at the top of the page any day you want to, and pay attention to ways in which that word is teaching you and leading you and showing up in new, and maybe even old ways. You can choose a new word weekly and journal about the places where it showed itself. There’s nothing magical about any particular word, but there is miracle in waking up and paying attention as you do your next right thing in love.

Thanks for listening to Episode 173 of the Next Right Thing.

I hope this simple practice of one-word journaling can be just one more wrung on the trellis upon which your rhythm of life can continue to grow. Because while it’s true, this is a podcast about making decisions, the bigger truth you know is that our daily decisions are actually making our lives.

As always, you can find me on Instagram @emilypfreeman or online at emilypfreeman.com, where you can also find this and every episode of the podcast. You can find the show notes and a complete transcript.

Well, after three years and over 12 million downloads, we’re asking for your opinions. While we’ve done listener surveys before, we like to keep up-to-date with who you are, where you are, what decisions are keeping you up at night and how we can better serve you. If you’re willing to share your opinions with us, visit emilypfreeman.com/survey. The link is in the show notes to make it easy, and you’ll be entered to win a \$100 Amazon gift card as a thank you for your time. Again, that’s emilypfreeman.com/survey. We’d love to hear from you.

Well, in closing, some words from Peter Drucker in his book *Managing Knowledge Means Managing Oneself*, and they’re worth paying attention to.

He writes, “In a few hundred years when the history of our time will be written from a long-term perspective, it is likely that the most important event historians will see is not technology, not the internet, not e-commerce. It is an unprecedented change in the human condition. For the first time, literally, substantial and rapidly growing numbers of people have choices. For the first time, they will have to manage themselves, and society is totally unprepared for it.”

Well, here on *The Next Right Thing*, we’re doing the work to prepare ourselves to make wise decisions for ourselves and for our communities. Thanks for being here, and I’ll see you next time.