

Keeping notes, writing a diary

Visitors to the Ombuds Office sometimes mention they wish they had kept detailed notes about their **achievements** — or they wish they had kept a diary about **problems** — and sometimes they ask us to keep notes and papers.

It is relatively easy for a person to create private notes; see below for several ideas. And in cases where a person would like for an MIT office to have a formal record of a suggestion or concern or complaint (or a compliment), the Ombuds Office can provide information on how to do this.

In accordance with the International Ombudsman Association Standards of Practice, the Ombuds Office itself keeps no case files for MIT and no records for any visitor to the office. However we often hear that people are glad that they kept notes and diaries.

*Keeping notes may be worthwhile with respect to **accomplishments** — and for dealing with **problems**.*

If something wonderful happens to you, or you create something that is special, you might want to write about it so you remember the details, later on. Do you find yourself frequently designing or inventing something? Have you taken photos or sketched, here and there, during vacations — might you wish to write travelogues? Are you engaged in a serious hobby? Did you come up with the central idea for a 100K competition entry, or a patent?

Would it make sense to keep tabs on your achievements at work? This may make sense, if for no other reason than to use when you are writing an annual report, or preparing for a performance evaluation.

Or maybe you are engaged in some difficult interaction or a negotiation that you are trying to understand. Or maybe you are concerned about problems with a colleague at work. You may think about keeping a log or a diary.

Why keep notes or a diary?

Keeping notes may provide a way to preserve detailed memories and provide a way to share them. It can be an excellent way to track ideas and thoughts and feelings. Keeping careful notes in a bound (scientific) logbook may help in documenting how you developed ideas for an invention or a business plan or a song or a screenplay.

If an aspect of life is difficult, there are a number of reasons to keep a chronology and other information:

- **If you are distracted or cannot eat and cannot sleep¹.** If you are feeling upset and angry, or bewildered or in grief, the issues at hand may be very distracting. This might also be true if you have a big decision to make. You may feel that your work is suffering, that you cannot concentrate, and that you cannot eat or get any rest. It may diminish distraction and distress to “keep a log” of what is happening, so your mind does not constantly struggle to understand and remember each event. In such a case you can keep notes and then tell yourself, “At least the facts are now safely here at hand; I do not need to keep thinking about them all the time. I can put it out of my mind for a little — until I learn more or can think about it with some sense of perspective.”
- **If you are unsure.** If you are unsure about what to do in a situation, it can be helpful to collect the facts — as an aid to developing options and in order to choose among options. Sometimes good ideas will come as you write — or as you read back over the notes of previous weeks. Sometimes you may find that it is suddenly easier to make a decision because of the notes.
- **If you want to analyze the situation.** Collecting all the facts may help you to be able to separate the *facts*, from your *feelings and opinions*, and then in turn from ideas you have about *what should happen next*. It is likely to be helpful to keep track of your feelings as well as the facts.

¹ See also *Coping in Difficult Circumstances — Some Ideas to Consider*, on the **Ombuds Office Website** under **Self-Help**

- **It may help you see if there (really) is a pattern.** If things are very good or very bad, it may be hard to be objective about how often the highs or the lows occur. People's feelings tend to swing between "always" and "never." Keeping a log may help if one is over-reacting — or in denial. A log may suggest that there is or is not really a pattern.
- **You may well want to seek support, or advice.** Collecting the facts may be helpful if you decide to talk things over with a confidential advisor.
- **You might want to seek action.** Collecting the facts may help if you want to initiate action of any kind. Notes might help if you wish to present your concerns directly to a person whom you see as the source of a problem². The facts you have collected, and some notes about your feelings, might be new to that person — and may in this way be helpful. The facts you collect might also be useful to a person who could take steps to fix a problem (see more below).
- **If you are scared.** You can of course collect and preserve your thoughts and observations on paper or on a home computer, in complete privacy. This may at times feel more comfortable than letting other people know what you are thinking and feeling.
- **It helps to keep a balanced perspective.** On a not-so-good day it may be helpful to have a record of all the good things — to affirm one's self-confidence and sense of accomplishment, and for a sense of comfort. (The same may be true in reverse, if you are considering a change in your life and want to track facts and feelings on both sides.)

How might I keep a diary or notes?

There are many ways to do this. Some people keep a diary by hand in a book, or write in a computer. Some people keep notes in a bound notebook, or keep notes in a calendar. These methods may help to affirm that the details have been recorded chronologically. Some people collect and print emails, photos, relevant published materials, etc. Some people keep copies of paper and email correspondence in order to document the details

² See also *Drafting a Letter to Someone who has Harassed or Offended You*, on the **Ombuds Office Website** under **Self-Help**

of ideas they receive from others, as well as their own ideas. Some keep collections of sketches as ideas develop.

(Please remember that you should get explicit permission before hand, if you wish to record a conversation. Recording without permission is illegal in many places.)

What might I do with the diary or notes I make?

You may wish first to think why you want a memoir, or diary or notes. For example, if you have written a memoir, or a collection of poetry for your family or friends, you might want to make an appropriate number of copies, so no one feels left out!

Next think about the idea of asking for action, and the issue of privacy.

Do you want someone to look into a problem and consider taking action³? If so you may wish to share your notes with line managers and the relevant staff offices — with managers who make decisions on behalf of your organization and who keep formal records. (*Please remember that these managers may be required to investigate and act on the concerns that are brought to them.*) These managers might include your supervisor, departmental headquarters staff, or offices relevant to the issue at hand, like Environmental Health and Safety, the relevant Human Resources and Student Affairs offices, Audit, and so on. (As mentioned above, in accordance with the IOA Standards of Practice, the Ombuds Office does not keep case records.)

If you wish to have a record, but to keep your notes private, you may give a copy to a trusted family member or friend. You may also mail a copy of your notes to yourself. If the matter is of great concern, you may wish to write, and collect the facts in some way that helps to date them — for example in a bound notebook. Seal a copy twice (one sealed envelope inside another) and send the copy by registered mail to yourself. The envelope or package can

³ See also *Report or Surface a Concern* on the Ombuds Office website: <http://web.mit.edu/ombud/report/index.html>

then be kept, still sealed. Occasionally one might have reason to follow up with copies of “updates” mailed to oneself.