

# Secret Partner Journals for Motivation, Fluency and Fun

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Japanese students generally like to write in journals or diaries. For most of this writing in the foreign language class, the audience is their teacher. While students do enjoy writing to and receiving feedback from teachers, they should be allowed to write in various formats. Writing to peers is one way to give students some variety in their writing assignments. But why have your students just write to peers in your class in an ordinary way? Add a little sense of mystery and adventure to the writing experience through secret partner journals!

This is a sure-fire way to increase motivation for regular writing activities. It provides learners with a chance to enter into real communication on a personal level with people in their age group. Much better than corresponding with a bunch of old fogey teachers who just don't have a clue. Through their journal entries they learn about peers, build up their English writing fluency and have fun doing it.

I have successfully used two types of secret partner journals with my students at Miyazaki International College, notebook journals and email journals. Now let me explain what each of these is and how they work

## Notebook Journals

### selecting of partners

It is best to begin this project after you are about three weeks into the term because class numbers can change and you need time to become familiar with your students' writing ability and interests. A teacher with a large class can pair up students in a single class but I have found that it works best if partners are from another class. Just approach a colleague with a class of about the same size and level and float the idea. After you find an interested colleague, it is a good idea to ask the students to fill in a survey of interests and some personal information. Try to pair students who are unlikely to know one another well, have similar interests, and have about the same writing ability. If your class numbers do not match, you could ask one of your best writers to do two journals, as long as they have no objections.

### tracking the journals

All of the notebooks should be the same type so that one is not distinguishable from another. For accurate tracking, Secret Journals in a notebook format must be numbered. Teachers need to make a list of numbers and the two names that go with each number. A word of caution here, the journals are after all "secret" so be very clear that students should not write their names **anywhere** in the notebook.

### beginning to write

Teachers need to decide the kind of writing they expect students to do in their journals. It is a good idea to inform students of your minimum length writing target (for example, 1 page per week). Tell your students to write as much as they can without stopping. You may choose to have instructor control over topics or let the students have a free dialogue and write about anything they desire. For the first couple of exchanges, at least, I have found it best to suggest writing topics, just to get them started. After several exchanges have proceeded, if you notice a group is having trouble finding topics, you should try and find out the students' interests and current activities and point them to some possible topics. Or, if necessary, simply assign some topics to these groups.

### making the exchange

You and your teaching colleague need to agree on a regular schedule for circulation of the journals. Let the students know the schedule. If class **A** receives the journals every Friday and must respond to their partner in **B** class by Monday, be sure they

know this. You have to be clear to your students that they have a responsibility to their partner and, therefore, need to do this assignment regularly. When someone is late with a journal try and make them feel strongly that they have let down their partner. One strategy is to have their partner write a message scolding them and expressing their disappointment.

### **grades and corrections**

You may want to assign a grade for writing passages which are of the appropriate length, completed on time, and contain relevant content. This could help motivate any persistently tardy partners. When you collect the journals from your class, read them over quickly (if you see that they wrote their name somewhere, erase it). From time to time you may wish to write in some comments but these should be kept to a minimum. The aim of this journal assignment is to build writing fluency so it is best not to correct their language here. Use other writing formats to work on accuracy.

## **Email Journals**

### **selecting of partners**

Same as for notebook journals.

### **tracking of journals**

Instead of the numbers used for notebook journals, you will need a list of partner names and email addresses. Of course, all >students must have email accounts and access to computers. Each group of partners will need to send their mail to the mailbox of one faculty member. It is easier to manage if **one** colleague handles all of the mail and forwards it to the other colleague. Create individual mail folders for each of your students and be sure to store all of the responses. When you send the message to their secret journal partner, **YOU MUST ERASE THE PREVIOUS ADDRESS HEADER** because it contains the name of the student.

### **beginning to write**

Same as for notebook journals except students need to have practiced typing for several weeks before they can begin. Also, they have to know how to use email (sending, replying, storing and deleting messages). For these reasons, email secret journals will probably have a later starting date than notebook journals.

### **making the exchange**

See "tracking of journals" for email journals above. One addition, however, has to do with contacting students to receive late journal reports. For this it is best to send them an *URGENT* email message, but be sure they know what the word urgent means beforehand.

### **grades and corrections**

Same as for notebook journals.

### **expansion (Overseas Pen Pals)**

If you plan to use email journals for longer than one term, you might consider linking your students up with pen pals abroad. Electronic listserves such as TESL-L have information on some groups seeking pen pals in foreign countries. The beginning of the Japanese school year in April is not a good time to try and organize an overseas electronic pen pal link up because this is near the end of the school year in many countries. For this reason, it is much wiser to start in September-October or January. Also, foreign pen pals working through a school class abroad tend to be more reliable in their replies than individuals on the internet. Obviously, we have no control over individuals outside of our own institutions. We can not scold them for tardiness.

## **References**

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<http://iteslj.org/>

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