

CURRENT EVENTS

12 Ideas for Writing Through the Pandemic With The New York Times

A dozen writing projects — including journals, poems, comics and more — for students to try at home.

By Natalie Proulx

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The coronavirus has transformed life as we know it. Schools are closed, we're confined to our homes and the future feels very uncertain. Why write at a time like this?

For one, we are living through history. Future historians may look back on the journals, essays and art that ordinary people are creating now to tell the story of life during the coronavirus.

But writing can also be deeply therapeutic. It can be a way to express our fears, hopes and joys. It can help us make sense of the world and our place in it.

Plus, even though school buildings are shuttered, that doesn't mean learning has stopped. Writing can help us reflect on what's happening in our lives and form new ideas.

We want to help inspire your writing about the coronavirus while you learn from home. Below, we offer 12 projects for students, all based on pieces from The New York Times, including personal narrative essays, editorials, comic strips and podcasts. Each project features a Times text and prompts to inspire your writing, as well as related resources from The Learning Network to help you develop your craft. Some also offer opportunities to get your work published in The Times, on The Learning Network or elsewhere.

We know this list isn't nearly complete. If you have ideas for other pandemic-related writing projects, please suggest them in the comments.

In the meantime, happy writing!

1. Journal

In "[The Quarantine Diaries](#)," Amelia Nierenberg spoke to Ady, an 8-year-old in the Bay Area who is keeping a diary. Ms. Nierenberg writes:

As the coronavirus continues to spread and confine people largely to their homes, many are filling pages with their experiences of living through a pandemic. Their diaries are told in words and pictures: pantry inventories, window views, questions about the future, concerns about the present.

Taken together, the pages tell the story of an anxious, claustrophobic world on pause.

"You can say anything you want, no matter what, and nobody can judge you," Ady said in a phone interview earlier this month, speaking about her diary. "No one says, 'scaredy-cat.'"

When future historians look to write the story of life during coronavirus, these first-person accounts may prove useful.

"Diaries and correspondences are a gold standard," said Jane Kamensky, a professor of American History at Harvard University and the faculty director of the Schlesinger Library at the Radcliffe Institute. "They're among the best evidence we have of people's inner worlds."

You can keep your own journal, recording your thoughts, questions, concerns and experiences of living through the coronavirus pandemic.

Not sure what to write about? Read the rest of Ms. Nierenberg's article to find out what others around the world are recording. If you need more inspiration, here are a few writing prompts to get you started:

- How has the virus disrupted your daily life? What are you missing? School, sports, competitions, extracurricular activities, social plans, vacations or anything else?
- What effect has this crisis had on your own mental and emotional health?
- What changes, big or small, are you noticing in the world around you?

You can write in your journal every day or as often as you like. And if writing isn't working for you right now, try a visual, audio or video diary instead.

2. Personal Narrative

As you write in your journal, you'll probably find that your life during the pandemic is full of stories, whether serious or funny, angry or sad. If you're so inspired, try writing about one of your experiences in a personal narrative essay.

Here's how Mary Laura Philpott begins her essay, "[This Togetherness Is Temporary](#)," about being quarantined with her teenage children:

Get this: A couple of months ago, I quit my job in order to be home more.

Go ahead and laugh at the timing. I know.

At the time, it was hitting me that my daughter starts high school in the fall, and my son will be a senior. Increasingly they were spending their time away from me at school, with friends, and in the many time-intensive activities that make up teenage lives. I could feel the clock ticking, and I wanted to spend the minutes I could — the minutes they were willing to give me, anyway — with them, instead of sitting in front of a computer at night and on weekends in order to juggle a job as a bookseller, a part-time gig as a television host, and a book deadline. I wanted more of them while they were still living in my house.

Now here we are, all together, every day. You're supposed to be careful what you wish for, but come on. None of us saw this coming.

Personal narratives are short, powerful stories about meaningful life experiences, big or small. Read the rest of Ms. Philpott's essay to see how she balances telling the story of a specific moment in time and reflecting on what it all means in the larger context of her life.

3. Poetry

Video

People have long turned to creative expression in times of crisis. During the coronavirus pandemic, artists are continuing to [illustrate](#), [play music](#), [dance](#), [perform](#) — and [write poetry](#).

That's what Dr. Elizabeth Mitchell, an emergency room doctor in Boston, did after a long shift treating coronavirus patients. Called "[The Apocalypse](#)," her poem begins like this:

This is the apocalypse
A daffodil has poked its head up
from the dirt and opened
sunny arms to bluer skies
yet I am filled with
dark and anxious dread
as theaters close as travel ends and
grocery stores display their empty rows
where toilet paper liquid bleach
and bags of flour stood in upright ranks.

Read the rest of Dr. Mitchell’s poem and note the lines, images and metaphors that speak to you. Then, tap into your creative side by writing a poem inspired by your own experience of the pandemic.

Need inspiration? Try writing a poem in response to one of our [Picture Prompts](#). Or, you can create a [found poem](#) using an article from The Times’s [coronavirus outbreak coverage](#). If you have access to the print paper, try making a [blackout poem](#) instead.

4. Letter to the Editor

Make your voice heard by writing a letter to the editor about a recent Times article, editorial, column or Opinion essay related to the pandemic. You can find articles in The Times’s [free coronavirus coverage](#) or The Learning Network’s [coronavirus resources for students](#). And, if you’re a high school student, your school can get you [free digital access](#) to The New York Times from now until July 6.

To see examples, read the letters written by young people in response to recent headlines in “[How the Young Deal With the Coronavirus](#).” Here’s what Addie Muller from San Jose, Calif., had to say about the Opinion essay “[I’m 26. Coronavirus Sent Me to the Hospital](#)”:

As a high school student and a part of Generation Z, I’ve been less concerned about getting Covid-19 and more concerned about spreading it to more vulnerable populations. While I’ve been staying at home and sheltering in place (as was ordered for the state of California), many of my friends haven’t been doing the same.

I know people who continue going to restaurants and have been treating the change in education as an extended spring break and excuse to spend more time with friends. I fear for my grandparents and parents, but this article showed me that we should also fear for ourselves.

I appreciated seeing this article because many younger people seem to feel invincible. The fact that a healthy 26-year-old can be hospitalized means that we are all capable of getting the virus ourselves and spreading it to others. I hope that Ms. Lowenstein continues spreading her story and that she makes a full recovery soon.

As you read, note some of the defining features of a letter to the editor and what made these good enough to publish. For more advice, see [these tips](#) from Thomas Feyer, the letters editor at The Times, about how to write a compelling letter. They include:

- Write briefly and to the point.
 - Be prepared to back up your facts with evidence.
 - Write about something off the beaten path.
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5. Editorial

Maybe you have more to say than you can fit in a 150-word letter to the editor. If that's the case, try writing an editorial about something you have a strong opinion about related to the coronavirus. What have you seen that has made you upset? Proud? Appreciative? Scared?

In "[Surviving Coronavirus as a Broke College Student](#)," Sydney Goins, a senior English major at the University of Georgia, writes about the limited options for students whose colleges are now closed. Her essay begins:

College was supposed to be my ticket to financial security. My parents were the first ones to go to college in their family. My grandpa said to my mom, "You need to go to college, so you don't have to depend on a man for money." This same mentality was passed on to me as well.

I had enough money to last until May— \$1,625 to be exact — until the coronavirus ruined my finances.

My mom works in human resources. My dad is a project manager for a mattress company. I worked part time at the university's most popular dining hall and lived in a cramped house with three other students. I don't have a car. I either walked or biked a mile to attend class. I have student debt and started paying the accrued interest last month.

I was making it work until the coronavirus shut down my college town. At first, spring break was extended by two weeks with the assumption that campus would open again in late March, but a few hours after that email, all 26 colleges in the University System of Georgia canceled in-person classes and closed integral parts of campus.

Read the rest of Ms. Goins's essay. What is her argument? How does she support it? How is it relevant to her life and the world?

Then, choose a topic related to the pandemic that you care about and write an editorial that asserts an opinion and backs it up with solid reasoning and evidence.

Not sure where to start? Try responding to some of our recent argumentative [writing prompts](#) and see what comes up for you. Here are a few we've asked students so far:

- [Should Schools Change How They Grade Students During the Pandemic?](#)
- [What Role Should Celebrities Have During the Coronavirus Crisis?](#)
- [Is It Immoral to Increase the Price of Goods During a Crisis?](#)

Or, consider essential questions about the pandemic and what they tell us about our world today: What weaknesses is the coronavirus exposing in our society? How can we best help our communities right now? What lessons can we learn from this crisis? [See more here.](#)

As an alternative to a written essay, you might try creating a video Op-Ed instead, like Katherine Oung's "[Coronavirus Racism Infected My High School.](#)"

6. Review

Are games, television, music, books, art or movies providing you with a much-needed distraction during the pandemic? What has been working for you that you would recommend to others? Or, what would you caution others to stay away from right now?

Share your opinions by writing a review of a piece of art or culture for other teenagers who are stuck at home. You might suggest TV shows, novels, podcasts, video games, recipes or anything else. Or, try something made especially for the coronavirus era, like a virtual [architecture tour](#), [concert](#) or [safari](#).

As a mentor text, read Laura Cappelle's [review](#) of French theater companies that have rushed to put content online during the coronavirus outbreak, noting how she tailors her commentary to our current reality:

The 17th-century philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote: "The sole cause of people's unhappiness is that they do not know how to stay quietly in their rooms." Yet at a time when much of the world has been forced to hunker down, French theater-makers are fighting to fill the void by making noise online.

She continues:

Under the circumstances, it would be churlish to complain about artists' desire to connect with audiences in some fashion. Theater, which depends on crowds gathering to watch performers at close quarters, is experiencing significant loss and upheaval, with many stagings either delayed indefinitely or canceled outright. But a sampling of stopgap offerings often left me underwhelmed.

To get inspired you might start by responding to our [related Student Opinion prompt](#) with your recommendations. Then turn one of them into a formal review.

7. How-to Guide

Being stuck at home with nowhere to go is the perfect time to learn a new skill. What are you an expert at that you can teach someone?

The Times has created several guides that walk readers through how to do something step-by-step, for example, this eight-step tutorial on [how to make a face mask](#). Read through the guide, noting how the author breaks down each step into an easily digestible action, as well as how the illustrations support comprehension.

Then, create your own how-to guide for something you could teach someone to do during the pandemic. Maybe it's a recipe you've perfected, a solo sport you've been practicing, or a FaceTime tutorial for someone who's never video chatted before.

Whatever you choose, make sure to write clearly so anyone anywhere could try out this new skill. As an added challenge, include an illustration, photo, or audio or video clip with each step to support the reader's understanding.

8. 36 Hours Column

For nearly two decades, The Times has published a weekly [36 Hours column](#), giving readers suggestions for how to spend a weekend in cities all over the globe.

While traveling for fun is not an option now, the Travel section decided to create a special reader-generated column of how to spend a weekend in the midst of a global pandemic. The result? "[36 Hours in ... Wherever You Are](#)." Here's how readers suggest spending a Sunday morning:

8 a.m. Changing routines

Make small discoveries. To stretch my legs during the lockdown, I've been walking around the block every day, and I've started to notice details that I'd never seen before. Like the fake, painted window on the building across the road, or the old candle holders that were once used as part of the street lighting. When the quarantine ends, I hope we don't forget to appreciate what's been on a doorstep all along.

— Camilla Capasso, Modena, Italy

10:30 a.m. Use your hands

Undertake the easiest and most fulfilling origami project of your life by folding 12 pieces of paper and [building this lovely star](#). Modular origami has been my absolute favorite occupational therapy since I was a restless child: the process is enthralling and soothing.

— Laila Dib, Berlin, Germany

12 p.m. Be isolated, together

Check on neighbors on your block or floor with an email, text or phone call, or leave a card with your name and contact information. Are they OK? Do they need something from the store? Help with an errand? Food? Can you bring them a hot dish or home-baked bread? This simple act — done carefully and from a safe distance — palpably reduces our sense of fear and isolation. I've seen the faces of some neighbors for the first time. Now they wave.

— Jim Carrier, Burlington, Vt.

Read the entire article. As you read, consider: How would this be different if it were written *by teenagers for teenagers*?

Then, create your own 36 Hours itinerary for teenagers stuck at home during the pandemic with ideas for how to spend the weekend wherever they are.

The 36 Hours editors suggest thinking “within the spirit of travel, even if many of us are housebound.” For example: an album or a song playlist; a book or movie that transports you; a particular recipe you love; or a clever way to virtually connect with family and friends. See more suggestions [here](#).

9. Photo Essay

In “[New York Was Not Designed for Emptiness](#),” New York Times photographers document what life in New York City looks like amid the pandemic. It begins:

The lights are still on in Times Square. Billboards blink and storefronts shine in neon. If only there were an audience for this spectacle.

But the thoroughfares have been abandoned. The energy that once crackled along the concrete has eased. The throngs of tourists, the briskly striding commuters, the honking drivers have mostly skittered away.

In their place is a wistful awareness that plays across all five boroughs: Look how eerie our brilliant landscape has become. Look how it no longer bustles.

This is not the New York City anyone signed up for.

Read the rest of the essay and view the photos. As you read, note the photos or lines in the text that grab your attention most. Why do they stand out to you?

What does the pandemic look like where you live? Create your own photo essay, accompanied by a written piece, that illustrates your life now. In your essay, consider how you can communicate a particular theme or message about life during the pandemic through both your photos and words, like in the article you read.

10. Comic Strip

Sometimes, words alone just won't do. Visual mediums, like comics, have the advantage of being able to express emotion, reveal inner monologues, and explain complex subjects in ways that words on their own seldom can.

If anything proves this point, it is the Opinion section's ongoing visual diary, "[Art in Isolation](#)." Scroll through this collection to see clever and poignant illustrations about life in these uncertain times. Read the comic "[Finding Connection When Home Alone](#)" by Gracey Zhang from this collection. As you read, note what stands out to you about the writing and illustrations. What lessons could they have for your own piece?

Then, create your own comic strip, modeled after the one you read, that explores some aspect of life during the pandemic. You can sketch and color your comic with paper and pen, or use an online tool like [MakeBeliefsComix.com](#).

Need inspiration? If you're keeping a quarantine journal, as we suggested above, you might create a graphic story based on a week of your life, or just a small part of it — like the meals you ate, the video games you played, or the conversations you had with friends over text. For more ideas, check out our [writing prompts](#) related to the coronavirus.

11. Podcast

Are you listening to any podcasts to help you get through the pandemic? Are they keeping you up-to-date on the news? Offering advice? Or just helping you escape from it all?

Create your own five-minute podcast segment that responds to the coronavirus in some way.

To get an idea of the different genres and formats your podcast could take, listen to one or more of these five-minute clips from three New York Times podcast episodes related to the coronavirus:

- [“The Daily | Voices of the Pandemic” \(1:15-6:50\)](#)
- [“Still Processing | A Pod From Both Our Houses” \(0:00-4:50\)](#)
- [“Modern Love | In the Midst of the Coronavirus Pandemic, People Share Their Love Stories” \(1:30-6:30\)](#)

Use these as models for your own podcast. Consider the different narrative techniques they use to relate an experience of the pandemic — interviews, nonfiction storytelling and conversation — as well as how they create an engaging listening experience.

Need ideas for what to talk about? You might try translating any of the writing projects above into podcast form. Or turn to our coronavirus-related [writing prompts](#) for inspiration.

12. Revise and Edit

“It doesn’t matter how good you think you are as a writer — the first words you put on the page are a first draft,” Harry Guinness writes in [“How to Edit Your Own Writing.”](#)

Editing your work may seem like something you do quickly — checking for spelling mistakes just before you turn in your essay — but Mr. Guinness argues it’s a project in its own right:

The time you put into editing, reworking and refining turns your first draft into a second — and then into a third and, if you keep at it, eventually something great. The biggest mistake you can make as a writer is to assume that what you wrote the first time through was good enough.

Read the rest of the article for a step-by-step guide to editing your own work. Then, revise one of the pieces you have written, following Mr. Guinness’s advice.

Publishing Opportunity: When you feel like your piece is “something great,” consider submitting it to one of the publishing opportunities we’ve suggested above. Or, see our list of [70-plus places that publish teenage writing and art](#) to find more.

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<https://www.nytimes.com/2020/04/15/learning/12-ideas-for-writing-through-the-pandemic-with-the-new-york-times.html>