

Michael Palin - 'KEEPING A DIARY'

This text is an edited adaptation of an article by Michael Palin from The Guardian newspaper. Michael Palin is famous as a member of the Monty Python comedy group and for his TV travel documentaries. Here he writes about his experience of keeping a diary for almost fifty years, and offers advice to would-be diary keepers.



1. When I began to keep a diary in April 1969, I could scarcely have imagined that decades of my life would not only be recorded but later published for all to see. I was twenty-five years old when I took a crisp new ring-backed notepad, headed the page “1969”, and wrote more in hope than in expectation.

2. I have always been attracted to lists, and the ultimate for any list keeper is to keep a record of what you’ve done each day. A diary, in fact. All I’d lacked in the past was the will to keep at it. Very little happened on that first day of the new diary, or so it seemed at the time. Yet when I reread my diary entry for Thursday, April 17th, 1969, my diary reminds me that I had David Jason [Del Boy in Only Fools and Horses] around for lunch, and took a phone call about a possible new show with John Cleese [Basil in Fawlty Towers, Monty Python member]. If I had not kept a diary I would never remember all this.

3. That’s the attraction of a diary. It remains in its own time. It reflects only what happened on that particular day. It doesn’t flatter and it isn’t influenced by what happened later. In that way it’s the most truthful record of real life, and that’s why I’m so glad I persevered with it.

4. There are times when I’ve had to drive myself to do it. Times when I had so little time to write that I just jotted down a few notes, but mostly I’ve tried to approach each morning’s entry as a story of the day that has just passed, without limits and without self-censorship. And composing a story a day is not a bad discipline for any would-be writer.

5. I never wrote with the idea of publication in mind. I don't think I even wrote for another reader. Occasionally I would read a piece to my wife, usually to settle an argument about what we had or hadn't done. But the longer I kept the diaries the more I saw them gathering some sort of historical relevance. Something that happened the day before might have little significance at the time, but twenty-five or thirty years later it acquires an extra dimension.

6. Thanks to the diaries I can remember things that I would almost certainly have forgotten. For a diarist, life ceases to be an indistinct blur. Experiences are there in sharp focus; some an immeasurable pleasure, others a profound pain. Which is the way life is. This is why diary-keeping is often prescribed as a therapy for those with depression, or those who feel their lives are somehow out of control. I encourage you to do as I did all those years ago; get your own notebook out and write down the year and the day and what happened to you in the last twenty-four hours. And keep on doing it. I try and get down what I can remember in thirty minutes maximum.

7. I've found the diary habit very helpful to my own development as a writer. You have to be able to think clearly and edit as you go. An online blog is fine, but I feel very strongly that it's not the same thing as writing down your own experiences in your own hand, in your own chosen notebook. Handwriting is so much more personal. It expresses your personality. I can tell from mine how I was feeling at the time – sometimes hurried and rushed, sometimes relaxed and expansive.

8. You may find it hard, as I did, to find time to write. You may get discouraged by days when nothing seems to happen. Don't give up. I found that details of what you ate or who you were with or what music you were listening to might seem insignificant at the time, but as the years go by these are the things you, and others, really want to know about. Tastes and circumstances change so fast that it is often hardly believable that this is what we did then, this is how we lived, this is what we were all worried about. The diarist keeps tabs on us all.

9. Keeping a diary means that all that seeing and hearing, loving and laughing, excitement and embarrassment, gladness and gloom that go to make up a life are not forgotten. In short, a diary blows away the mists of time, and offers your life back to you.

Answer A 1 and 2 (Comprehension questions)

AND

B (Personal Writing)

A)

1. In the above extract, Michael Palin suggests many reasons why **keeping a diary** is a **good idea**. **Outline** (summarise) three of the reasons in your own words. **(5)**

2. What kind of a **person** is Michael Palin, do you think, based on this extract? Make **three** clear points and support with **quotations**. Analyse the language and structure in the extract. **(5)**

Write approximately one paragraph per answer.

In this extract, Michael Palin says he is glad he **persevered** (kept going despite difficulties) and continued writing his diary.

B) Write a piece of personal writing in which you talk about at least one occasion in your life when you encountered difficulties. (10)

Aim to write **one side**.

- *Use paragraphs*
- *Include a range of sentence types / lengths*
- *Use ambitious vocabulary*
- *Structure your work*
- *Remember accurate punctuation and spelling*