Being Grateful

Cultivating appreciation through the practice of gratitude

RELATING | Appreciation

What you will need:

- 1 - 30
- Individual or small groups
- 10 mins preparation
- 1.5 hrs execution
- Pen and paper, optionally jars or notebooks for students

Related Tools:

Cultivating Awe

Menu:

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"Be more aware of all the good in your life, become more positive with only 5 minutes a day. Experience how it is to reflect and think about the nice experiences that you have daily and don't get caught up in the negativity."

—Natalie van Ommen

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I. Overview

In a world that often focuses on what is missing, gratitude invites us to notice and appreciate what is already present. This tool introduces students to gratitude as a simple yet powerful practice that shifts perspective, supports emotional well-being and appreciation for themselves and their surroundings.

Practising gratitude isn't about ignoring challenges but about broadening our viewpoint. Research shows that small, consistent acts of gratitude can positively impact mood, resilience and relationships over time. The real challenge lies not in understanding this, but in making gratitude a lasting habit.

By introducing students to gratitude journaling and exploring various journaling formats to support a sustained practice, they can choose the approach that resonates most and reflect on what works best, gradually creating a personal ritual to carry into everyday life.

Learning outcome

- The student is able to relate to others and the world with a basic sense of appreciation, gratitude and joy

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II. Learning Activity

By practising gratitude, students learn to recognise and appreciate what is already present to develop a more positive outlook, supporting emotional well-being, self-reflection and resilience.

1. Why Gratitude Matters 15 mins

Use the Why Gratitude handout to support your introduction with background theory, research insights and practical examples. Start by introducing the concept of gratitude: what it is, why it matters, and how it can contribute to emotional balance, resilience and a more positive mindset.

Emphasise the long-term benefits of developing a gratitude habit, especially in a world that often highlights what is lacking or could be improved. Introduce journaling as a simple yet effective method to practise gratitude in daily life.

Tip: consider having students watch one or more short videos on gratitude before the session. Suggested links can be found in the Key Advice section.

2. Checking in with Gratitude 15 mins

Invite students to take a quiet moment to breathe deeply and settle into the present moment. Guide a brief check-in, encouraging them to become aware of their body and to observe their thoughts and feelings without judgment.

Then, ask students to silently recall a few specific things they feel grateful for today.

Finally, invite volunteers to share with the group, emphasising a supportive and safe

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classroom environment.

Tip: optionally, refer to the provided meditation script for a brief guided check-in, along with questions to support reflection.

3. Exploring Ways to Practise Gratitude 25 mins

Introduce three journaling formats for students to choose from:

- A letter to someone (real or imaginary);
- A personal journal entry;
- Short notes for a gratitude jar to revisit later.

Ask students to discuss in pairs which format they feel most drawn to and why. Then, invite them to choose a format and begin writing, allowing approximately 20 minutes for the activity.

Hand out the journaling guide with instructions and reflection prompts. Students can also use this for continued practice at home.

Tip: provide materials such as jars, paper or notebooks for the session. If students have been introduced to gratitude journaling before, consider asking them to bring their materials themselves.

4. Settling into Gratitude 10 mins

At the end of the writing time, guide a short reflective check-in. Invite students to sit quietly, take a few deep breaths, and observe any shifts in their thoughts or feelings since they began writing.

Encourage silent reflection on their experience:

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- What arose during the exercise?
- What do they notice now?

Students may jot down private notes if they wish, with no pressure to share.

Tip: allow ample time for this moment of silence, as students may need a minute to settle. Model stillness by remaining calm and present, resisting the urge to rush or fill the quiet too quickly.

5. Turning Practice into Habit

15 mins

Facilitate a group discussion to reflect on the journaling experience:

- What was it like to write about gratitude?
- Did anything feel surprising or unexpected?
- What else did you notice during the process?

Then, lead the group in a discussion on building a gratitude habit:

- What could help make this a regular practice?
- What obstacles might arise?
- What support or resources would you need to maintain it?

Invite students to write down one intention for the coming week: one small, manageable step they can take to make gratitude a regular part of their daily life.

Tip: consider scheduling a follow-up check-in after a few weeks, giving students the opportunity to share their experiences and reflect on how practicing gratitude has influenced their daily lives.

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III. Assessment

Depending on whether students continue their journaling practice in the weeks following the session, they can either engage in journaling over a longer period of time while keeping a brief weekly log to reflect on their ongoing experiences, or write a short standalone reflective essay based on their initial experience and personal insights from the session.

Purpose

Assessment *as* learning aims to strengthen the learning process and the development of metacognitive skills. It empowers students to direct their own learning and to become independent, critical self-assessors.

Roles

Self-assessment

Characteristics

Self-regulated learning

Materials

Weekly reflection log, reflective essay

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Assessment

Weekly Reflection Log

If you continue journaling over the next few weeks, keep a short reflection log to reflect on your experiences. Each week, take a few minutes to answer the following questions in 4 to 6 sentences:

- What did I write about this week?
- How did I feel before and after journaling?
- Did anything shift in my mindset, mood or behaviour?
- What helped me stick with the practice this week, or what made it difficult?
- Did journaling impact how I handled stress or challenging situations this week?

Be honest and specific. The goal is not to write perfectly, but to become more aware of your process.

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Assessment

Reflective Essay

Write a 1-2 page reflective essay based on your experience in the session.
Use the questions below to guide your reflection:

- What was it like to engage in gratitude journaling?
- What emotions, thoughts or insights arose for you?
- How did it affect the way you relate to yourself, others or the world?
- Do you see value in continuing this practice? Why or why not?
- What might help you integrate this into your daily or weekly life?

Try to move beyond description and explore what the experience meant to you.
Use specific examples where possible.

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IV. Key Advice

Suggested links you may want to watch or listen to in preparation and/or share with students before Step 1 are:

- The Science of Gratitude
- Want to be happy? Be grateful | David Steindl-Rast
- Christina Costa: How gratitude rewires your brain
- Podcast: The Power of Gratitude with Dr. Laurie Santos

The **Why Gratitude handout** (Step 1), **Meditation Script** (Step 2) and **Practising Gratitude** (Step 3) can be downloaded below.

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Key Advice

Why Gratitude

In positive psychology, gratitude is considered a central theme due to its strong links with well-being. But what gratitude actually is, remains the subject of ongoing study.
As Emmons and Crumpler (2000, in Allen, 2018) describe, "Gratitude has been conceptualised as an emotion, a virtue, a moral sentiment, a motive, a coping response, a skill, and an attitude. It is all of these and more." Gratitude is not just about being thankful for material things, but about recognising non-material support, opportunities or experiences, often in connection with others.

In the context of gratitude journaling, gratitude can be defined as recognising that one has obtained a positive outcome and recognising that there is an external source for this positive outcome (Emmons & McCullough, 2003).

Gratitude has been found to strongly correlate with various indicators of mental well-being. Experimental research shows that regular gratitude practice, for example, keeping a daily journal or writing a gratitude letter, can lead to more positive emotions, greater life satisfaction, and reductions in stress and depressive symptoms (Emmons & McCullough, 2003; Seligman et al., 2005).

The idea is simple: by regularly pausing to notice positive experiences and expressing appreciation, we shift our focus from what is wrong to what is going well. At the same time, more research is needed to understand the exact biological mechanisms behind these effects.

For students, who often face academic stress and life transitions, a gratitude routine may support emotional well-being and enhance resilience, the ability to recover from setbacks. A recurring finding is that gratitude journaling not only increases the positive but also reduces the negative.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, for example, students and other participants were assigned either a brief online gratitude writing exercise or a control exercise involving expressive writing about stress. After one month, the gratitude group showed significant reductions in stress and negative affect, while the expressive writing group showed no improvement. Control groups without any writing also showed no reduction in stress. This suggests that in times of high stress, focusing on gratitude may be more effective than simply venting worries (Fekete & Deichert, 2022).

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Key Advice

Meditation Script

Start with a short meditation exercise to help everyone let go of what came before and become fully present. You may have your way of guiding this, or you can use the script from the 2-Minute Focus Reset Meditation (Headspace, 2022):

If it's comfortable for you, let's begin by taking a gentle, deep breath. In through the nose…and out through the mouth. And with that exhalation, adopting a comfortable posture of awareness, returning the breath to its natural rhythm and allowing your attention to gently drop into this present moment. And without turning or looking around, just lightly bringing into your awareness all that's in your surrounding space.

[… pause …]

And with your next out breath, allow your focus to fall onto one specific object that's in your field of vision. And it's not an intense stare, so just maintaining it as a very soft focus.

[… pause …]

And this is a gentle practice, so if at any point the eyes become fatigued, allowing yourself to gently close them for a moment or two, and then reopening them, nice and easy.

[… pause …]

Noticing as any thoughts come and go and just returning the attention back to your object.

[… pause …]

And now, letting the focus zoom back out again, being aware of your surroundings, perhaps blinking a few times, allowing this cultivated focus to follow you into your next activity.

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Afterwards, take a moment to check in with the group and see how everyone is feeling. You can use a few open-ended questions to guide the conversation:

- Did anything come up for you during this meditation? How did it make you feel?
- Looking back on your day, was there a moment that made you smile? What was it?
- Was there anything that made you feel grateful today? Did someone show you kindness, or did you receive a compliment?
- Did you have a positive experience today? What happened?

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Key Advice

How to Practise Gratitude

There are many ways you can actively engage with gratitude. Whether it's writing down three things you're grateful for each day or simply taking a moment to reflect through a hand-on-heart exercise, regular practice has been shown to improve well-being over time (Tolcher, Cauble & Downs, 2024).

Below are three journal formats you can try. Each offers a different way to explore and express what you appreciate. Choose the one that feels right for you or experiment with all three.

1. Gratitude Journal
Write a short daily or weekly journal entry in which you reflect on moments that brought a sense of gratitude. Focus on specific and personal experiences. Be honest and descriptive.

Prompt questions to get started:

- What are three things you're grateful for today, no matter how small?
- What is something small that made you smile today?
- What is something you've learned recently that has improved your life?
- What is something beautiful you've noticed in your surroundings?
- What is a stressor you're grateful to have put behind you this year?

2. A Letter to Someone
Write a letter to someone you feel grateful for. This could be a friend, a teacher, a family member, someone from the past, or even someone imaginary. You don't have to send the letter; it's about expressing what they mean to you.

Prompt questions to guide your letter:

- Who is someone you're thankful for, and why?
- What moment or memory with this person are you most grateful for?
- What would you like them to know about the impact they've had on you?
- What would you say to them if you had no filter?

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3. Gratitude Jar

Write short notes about moments of gratitude and keep them in a jar, box or notebook. You can revisit them later when you need encouragement or a more positive perspective.

Prompt ideas for your notes:

- A compliment someone gave you;
- A small act of kindness you witnessed or received;
- Something you enjoyed today, e.g. a meal, a song, a conversation;
- A personal strength that helped you this week;
- Something you're looking forward to.

By engaging in these exercises, you can cultivate a personal habit of appreciation that enhances your well-being and helps you stay positive, even in the face of challenges.

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