

Principles to Write an Effective Inventory

When beginning step 4, it is important to know that there is no one right way to do this inventory. An inventory is a very personal process. Many people get discouraged or frustrated trying to figure out how to create an inventory, but we encourage you to simply begin, even if that means just writing down a list of events.

We need to seek the Lord's guidance. He will help us be truthful and loving as we sort through our memories and feelings and conduct an honest self-examination. We may also consult with our sponsors or others who have already done an inventory. They will help us realize how best to proceed.

The objective of the inventory is to help us make things right with God, ourselves, and others. The inventory gives us an opportunity to step back and look at our lives. As we do, we see patterns in the ways we have responded to our life experiences, identifying both character flaws and character virtues. Below are some simple principles that will help us begin our inventories.

A. Prepare to Make Our Inventories

As we begin our inventories, it is important to continue to work with our sponsors. Sponsors help us work this step effectively. Often the first instruction sponsors give is to begin every aspect of the inventory with prayer and to ask God to lead us to the truth. We can trust the impressions and thoughts that come to us.

Prayer will also help us maintain hope throughout the process. We have all faced the same overwhelming task with the same struggle of being rigorously honest. We testify that this process is the sure path that has led us back into an honest and joyful relationship with ourselves, others, and God.

B. Write Our Inventories

The inventories of our lives will be most effective if we write them. We can hold a written list in our hands, review it, and refer to it when necessary. Unwritten thoughts are easy to forget. As we write our inventories, we will be able to think more clearly about the events in our lives and focus on them with less distraction.

Some of us are reluctant to write our inventories because we feel embarrassed or fearful about our writing abilities or about someone else reading what we have written. But we don't let these fears stop us. Our spelling, grammar, penmanship, and typing skills do not matter.

C. Identify Key Incidents

We write about the key moments in our lives that have impacted us. As we work on our inventories, we look beyond the events and examine our thoughts, feelings, and beliefs. These are actually the roots of our addictive behaviors. We find that to fully heal and recover, we need to examine our fear, pride, resentment, anger, self-will, and self-pity.

We sometimes feel overwhelmed trying to decide what to write first. Some people group their lives according to age, year in school, places lived, or relationships. Others start by brainstorming. We probably won't remember everything all at once. We need to continue to pray and allow the Lord to bring things to our remembrance. We leave this process open-ended and add to our inventories as we remember experiences and situations.

We recognize that some memories may be distorted and inaccurate because of the profound impact self-deception and trauma can have on our memories. Some of the memories are so painful and embarrassing that we may be reluctant to acknowledge them and write them down. The Spirit will guide us as we consistently pray and seek feedback from our sponsors. These sources of support will help us recognize truth.

D. Be Fearlessly Honest in Our Self-Examination

The next important step in our inventories is to better understand our pasts. Describing what happened, how we felt, why it happened, and who else it affected is a process of self-discovery. Through a fearlessly honest self-examination, we acknowledged the truth of our pasts and what that meant for the future. Being honest in our self-examination helped us repent, seek forgiveness, and heal more fully.

This may be the most difficult phase of the inventory process. It is painful to see our part in dysfunctional relationships and negative experiences. But our sponsors can support us and help keep us focused and honest. We can persist and acknowledge that this process of self-discovery is essential to our recovery. As Elder Bruce D. Porter said, "The discovery of self is a profoundly spiritual experience, one that is possible for anyone willing to learn. ... If the goal is pursued faithfully, [we] will find treasure at the journey's end" ("[Searching Inward](#)," *Ensign*, Nov. 1971, 63, 65).

Please see the section titled “Example 1—Question Format” for examples of questions to help guide you through an honest self-examination.

E. Celebrate Our Efforts

We recognize that an honest written inventory is an ongoing process in recovery. We found we needed to revisit our inventories and add to them. This process helped strengthen our understanding and ability to maintain recovery and helped us develop new and improved healthy relationships.

Step 4 is a process. We can celebrate all our efforts in writing our inventories. The reflection of ourselves we will see as we work this step can inspire us to change the direction of our lives if we let it. Because of the Savior’s love and grace, we do not have to be what we have been. When we call on the Lord for guidance as we examine our lives, we will come to recognize our experiences as learning opportunities.

The inventory process empowers us to humbly acknowledge our weaknesses and to seek God’s help to turn them into strengths. “And if men come unto me I will show unto them their weakness. I give unto men weakness that they may be humble; and my grace is sufficient for all men that humble themselves before me; for if they humble themselves before me, and have faith in me, then will I make weak things become strong unto them” ([Ether 12:27](#)).

F. We May Need Professional Help

We may have had very difficult experiences or things that have happened to us. Some of these things may include traumatic experiences, such as abuse, violence, or severe psychological pain. As we write our inventories, remembering these difficult experiences can bring back the pain, fear, and emotions associated with these events. Reliving these painful experiences and emotions can cause further harm to us without the proper support and help. We should consider seeking professional help from a therapist, counselor, or doctor to process these kinds of events. Professionals can help us safely process trauma at an appropriate pace. If you are unsure whether you need this help, please discuss this with someone you trust. You could also meet with a professional for an assessment and consider their recommendation.

Examples of Writing an Inventory in Step 4

There are many successful formats for creating an inventory in step 4. However, we have learned that the following elements make an inventory most effective for recovery.

1. **God**—Making an inventory is hard work, and we cannot accomplish it alone. We need God's support. Prayer is an important part of this vital endeavor. As we turn to God in prayer, He will strengthen us and help us do this important work.
2. **Honesty**—Inventories are careful reviews of our lives and should include incidents, situations, and relationships we recall with discomfort or uneasiness. We must be as honest and thorough as possible. We have found that the deeper we are willing to search our souls, the more effective working step 4 will be.
3. **Writing**—The process of writing gives us more insight, perspective, and clarity. Some of our situations make it challenging to put our inventories in writing. Though we have different abilities and inclinations, the Lord will bless our every effort to place our most difficult experiences before Him in writing. If you struggle with writing, ask your sponsor or someone else to help.
4. **Sponsor**—A sponsor should be someone who has worked the 12 steps and completed his or her own inventory. Sponsors can be most helpful in guiding us through the process and putting our lives in perspective. If you haven't already, we strongly suggest you begin working with a sponsor.

After we have written our inventories, we keep them to use as a reference for the next steps in recovery. Our inventories help us identify character weaknesses and strengths in steps 6 and 7, and the people or institutions we mention in our inventories will be those we need to forgive or make amends to in steps 8 and 9. When the time is right, we can destroy the portions of our inventories that include negative or angry expressions, accounts of personal transgressions, and any other sensitive matters that we should not share with others. Destroying these writings can be a symbol of our repentance and a powerful way to let go of our pasts.

As previously mentioned, there are many ways to write an inventory. Below are three examples. There are many other ways to write an inventory that are not listed here. These examples will help us get started. No matter what approach or combination of approaches we use, it's essential that we allow God to show us how He sees us and each situation. If we do, God will give us increased strength and hope in this process.

How do we begin? Some people work chronologically through their lives according to age, school year, places lived, or relationships. Others start by brainstorming. We won't remember everything all at once, so we continue to pray and allow the Lord to bring things to our remembrance. We can always add to our inventories as we remember situations and experiences.

- **Example 1—Question Format.** This method uses questions to examine troublesome life incidents. It helps us delve deeply into each situation.
- **Example 2—Worksheet Format.** This method helps us chart and organize the people or institutions we harmed. It helps us identify our character weaknesses and provides valuable information for upcoming steps.
- **Example 3—Journal Format.** A journaling approach can shed light on our lives. It gives us the opportunity to ponder and process the details of our lives.
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Example 1—Question Format

As we review our lives, the first challenge is to identify past and present situations that make us feel uncomfortable. Ultimately, we are trying to see our own character weaknesses and to identify people we need to forgive or to whom we need to make amends. The following example uses questions to help us make a fearless and thorough self-examination. These questions help us identify key people, situations, principles, institutions, or incidents. They help us describe what happened, how we felt, why it happened, and who it affected. We devote one page to each person or situation. On each page, we write our own answers to the questions. We try to keep our answers under 15 words—short phrases are enough.

The following example deals with just one incident, the accidental death of a sister.

Initial Questions

1. What happened? Give a short description of the situation.

My sister was killed in a car accident.

2. Why did this incident bother me?

It was the worst thing that has ever happened to me.

3. How did the incident affect me and my relationships (financially, emotionally, physically)? How did this incident leave me wounded?

I withdrew from others. I'm still insecure. I started using alcohol to numb the pain, and I gained weight. I lost any desire to continue my education. I don't want to get close to anyone. I'm afraid to be in a serious relationship.

4. What were my initial feelings when it happened? What feelings do I still have about this incident?

I felt shocked and pained when it happened. I felt angry with God. I still feel wounded.

5. Looking back, what were some of my character weaknesses that contributed to this situation? (We must prayerfully seek God's help to be humble and face the truth, even though it may be very painful.)

- o Was I being dishonest? Who did I lie to?

Mostly I lied to myself. I blamed God and my family for my own inability to have faith in Jesus Christ.

- o Was I frightened?

Yes, I couldn't understand why Heavenly Father hadn't protected her. If such a bad thing could happen once, it might happen again.

- o Was I resentful?

Yes, mostly at God but also at her husband and the driver of the car that hit her. I didn't think it was fair that she was killed.

- o What evidence of pride do I see in my life? Do I see signs of self-deception, self-righteousness, or self-pity in my attitudes and actions?

I expected my life to always be happy. I didn't think bad things should happen to me or my family. I definitely felt sorry for myself.

6. Did my actions hurt or negatively affect anyone else? If so, who?

My actions hurt others in my family, like my brother-in-law. I was unstable in my emotions and struck out in anger at my family. I was unforgiving of the other driver. My anger at God was hurtful to me.

7. What did I do to control the situation? What actions did I take or omit to get what I wanted?

I either withdrew or lashed out at others. I threw tantrums. I just did not want it to be true. I wanted to go back in time. I wanted God to bring her back to life. I even asked my parents to pray for her to come back. My thinking was extremely confused!

8. How did I act like a victim to manipulate others (for example, need for attention, sympathy, and so on)? Did I insist on being right? Did I feel slighted or unacknowledged?

I threw tantrums, isolated myself, and refused to talk to a grief counselor. I could see only my own feelings and my own pain. I really just wanted someone else to make it all better for me.

9. Was it any of my business? Whose feelings did I ignore by thinking only of myself?

It was my business. She was my sister, and I felt a lot of pain. However, I never stopped to consider the pain others were feeling—my parents, my brothers and sisters, our friends, her husband.

10. Did I resist help from God and others?

Yes, I was mad at God, so I wouldn't pray. I wouldn't talk to anyone or let myself be comforted.

Example 2—Worksheet Format

Another way to make an inventory is to fill out the chart below. First, fill out the first column on the left, then the second, third, fourth, and so on. Filling out this chart can reveal the patterns we need to look for in our inventories. We consider positive traits that we need to develop or that we already have, always remembering that the Lord can turn our weaknesses into strengths (see [Ether 12:27](#)). We take time to read and ponder the Lord's counsel.

Person, institution, situation, incident, or principle about which I have negative feelings

What happened and what action did I take? Give a short description of the event. Consider listing items from my life chronologically, perhaps in increments of 5 to 10 years.

Effect

Why did this person, institution, situation, incident, or principle bother me? Did it affect my emotional, physical, or financial security? Did it affect my relationships, sense of self-worth, or ambitions for the future?

Feelings

What were my feelings at the time? What feelings do I still have about it? Do I feel regret for my part in the problem or resentment toward a person, institution, situation, incident, or principle?

Character weaknesses

What evidence of pride do I see in my life? Do I see signs of self-deception, self-righteousness, self-pity, or self-will in my attitudes and actions? What were my self-centered fears that contributed to this situation or incident or to my feelings about this person, institution, or principle?

Forgive and make amends

Who do I need to forgive? To whom do I need to make amends? Remember to add my own name to this column.

Positive traits

When doing my inventory, I may focus on difficult aspects of my life. However, I should also think about my strengths and positive traits. What are my character strengths? Which character strengths do I need to develop further? Focusing on my positive strengths can remind me of my infinite and indestructible divine worth.

0 to 10 years

Person, institution, situation, incident, or principle (What happened? Who was hurt? and so on)	Effect (emotional, physical, or financial security; relationships, self-worth, or ambitions)	Feelings (resentment, fear, regret, hurt, and so on)	Character weaknesses (self-will, pride, dishonesty, self-righteousness, self-pity, self-deception, and so on)	Forgive and make amends (Who do I need to forgive or make amends to?)	Positive traits (charity, humility, honesty, courage, faith in Jesus Christ, and so on)
Sam, a kid at school, kept making fun of me and called me names.	This affected the way I felt about myself and my relationships with friends. I wanted to be brave, but I couldn't.	I was afraid, and I also felt ashamed of how scared I was. I wish I had just hit him.	self-pity, self-righteousness	I need to forgive Sam. In the future, I want to be a person who is kind but also honest.	I am a nice person. I generally see the good in others.
I made a treat at a Primary activity. I wanted to take it home to show Mom and Dad, but I kept eating little bites as I walked. Finally, I just ate the rest.	This affected my sense of self-worth. I wanted to share my accomplishment with my parents, but I failed.	All the way home I regretted what I was doing. I felt embarrassed, fat, and weak. I felt I was a failure.	pride, self-pity, gluttony, lack of self-control	me	I want to do the right thing. I think I have a good heart.

10 to 20 years

Person, institution, situation, incident, or principle (What happened? Who was hurt? and so on)	Effect (emotional, physical, or financial security; relationships, self-worth, or ambitions)	Feelings (resentment, fear, regret, hurt, and so on)	Character weaknesses (self-will, pride, dishonesty, self-righteousness, self-pity, self-deception, and so on)	Forgive and make amends (Who do I need to forgive or make amends to?)	Positive traits (charity, humility, honesty, courage, faith in Jesus Christ, and so on)
I discovered masturbation when kids at school were joking about it. When I asked my	I was conflicted inside because it felt good but left me feeling bothered. When I was around	I felt embarrassed, cut off by my mom, alone,	self-will, dishonest, unclean, lack of self-control	me, my mom	I guess I have a good conscience. I

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mom about it, she became flustered and told me to never do it and never talk about it again.	friends at church, I felt like I was the only one struggling with it since no one discussed it.	dishonest, and dirty.			want to be good.
For about 14 months, I regularly stole cash from the register or used products without paying at the place where I worked.	I was always nervous around my manager. I feel guilty about it now but don't know how to make it right since that business doesn't exist anymore.	fear, greed, self-centeredness	dishonesty, self-will, self-deception	the place where I was working, my manager	I'm a hard worker.

20 to 30 years

Person, institution, situation, incident, or principle (What happened? Who was hurt? and so on)	Effect (emotional, physical, or financial security; relationships, self-worth, or ambitions)	Feelings (resentment, fear, regret, hurt, and so on)	Character weaknesses (self-will, pride, dishonesty, self-righteousness, self-pity, self-deception, and so on)	Forgive and make amends (Who do I need to forgive or make amends to?)	Positive traits (charity, humility, honesty, courage, faith in Jesus Christ, and so on)
I got drunk at a party and woke up with someone I barely knew.	This affected my feelings of security, safety, and self-worth. I wanted to get married in the temple, but it doesn't look like that can happen.	I feel dirty, hopeless, and miserable. I'm so sorry I even went to that party. Why did this happen to me?	distrust, contempt for myself and my so-called friends, self-pity	me, my friends	I'm a kind person. I want to get past this somehow. I have worked hard to develop my talents.
My sister was killed in a car accident. I felt close to her	This has been a huge trauma in my life. I'm insecure physically and	I'm depressed so much of the time. I know that alcohol doesn't	anxiety, fear, discontent, self-pity	God, me, my sister's husband, the people I	I am a good student and a hard worker. I love people

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husband and children, but he cut himself off from our family.	emotionally. My relationship with my sister and her family is totally gone.	help the situation, but it makes it go away for a little while.		hurt with my drinking	and get along with others at work.

30 to 60 years

Person, institution, situation, incident, or principle (What happened? Who was hurt? and so on)	Effect (emotional, physical, or financial security; relationships, self-worth, or ambitions)	Feelings (resentment, fear, regret, hurt, and so on)	Character weaknesses (self-will, pride, dishonesty, self-righteousness, self-pity, self-deception, and so on)	Forgive and make amends (Who do I need to forgive or make amends to?)	Positive traits (charity, humility, honesty, courage, faith in Jesus Christ, and so on)
I resent my son-in-law. He always needs money, yet he can't keep a job. He is careless. I'm afraid he's making my daughter unhappy.	I'm worried about finances. When I have bad feelings toward him, it affects my relationship with my daughter.	I feel frustrated. I feel resentful, and I'm angry with myself for feeling resentful. I feel trapped and unable to think of any good solution.	self-righteous, self-pity, pride, resentment	my son-in-law, my daughter, my spouse	I am usually pretty generous. I work hard at home and in the Church.
My spouse is talking about separation or divorce. I know I haven't been perfect, but it's not always me that causes the problems.	My relationships are terrible. My self-worth is affected as well as my financial and emotional security.	I am so scared. What if I don't get to see the kids? I don't know how I can survive a divorce.	fear, self-pity, resentment, anxiety	me, my spouse, my kids	I've tried really hard to change. I even went to counseling.

Example 3—Journal Format

Writing can be a powerful tool for understanding and healing. Prayerfully journaling before or after working on our inventories can be very helpful. As we review our lives, we simply start writing about the situations that we uncovered and how we feel. There is no system to this. We just pick up a pen, say a prayer, and begin writing. Let it flow! As we think through our lives using journaling, we look for people, institutions, situations, incidents, or principles that we have negative feelings about. We write about how our emotions and feelings are affected, and we try to understand what our character weaknesses are and what strengths we would like to develop. We also pray to know who we need to forgive and to whom we need to make amends. Here are a few examples of journal entries:

- I've been thinking about my experiences in childhood lately. I remember that kid—I can't remember his name—but he was bigger than me, and he was so mean. He kept calling me a baby and even worse names. I had to run home from school as fast as I could every day. I wonder if that was when I started to feel like I didn't have any friends and that I couldn't even make friends. I hate it when I run away from problems. I hate to be afraid, but it just isn't fair that some people are bigger and meaner. I always try to be friendly. I guess I feel sorry for myself. I can't understand why people aren't nicer to me. I'm a nice person.
- I was kind of a fat kid. I am still a little overweight, but it's hard for me to stop eating something I love. Even when I was in Primary, I could never get a treat home to share with my family. It made me feel like a failure. I've always been embarrassed about my eating and about my weight. Some people can eat whatever they want, and it doesn't affect their weight. That makes me really mad!
- I have a problem with sexual lust. It's really not my fault that I have a hard time with that. I discovered masturbation when kids at school were joking about it. When I asked my mom about it, she became flustered and told me to never do it and never talk about it again. But what about when the bishop interviewed me later? Should I have told him?
- I felt so ashamed about what was happening in my home between my parents that the only thing that made me feel better was smoking. I found some cigarettes and they gave me a lift, a charge that helped with how miserable I felt. I had my own secret life when I got up in the night and sleep wouldn't come. I thought I could quit anytime, but I really couldn't. Then I ran out of the cigarettes I found, and I had to steal to have money for more. I stole things from where I was working. I was so nervous that I

would be caught, either by someone in my family or worse, by the cops. I hated the dishonesty, but I needed that smoking time alone—something just for me. I guess I felt sorry for myself.

- Another bad memory happened when I was in college. I wanted to be like my roommates, but I didn't get invited to many parties. I remember the night I finally went to a party where there was lots of booze. "Why not?" I thought. I wanted to be part of the crowd. I wanted to have some fun for once. I don't remember what happened next, but when I woke up, I was with someone I didn't really know. Things had gone from bad to worse. Why can't I ever catch a break? Nothing turns out in my favor.
- It seemed like the end of the world when we got the news that my sister was killed. She was walking along the road and a car mowed her down. My family was devastated, and some of us acted out even more than before. Her husband was so mad that he said he would never let their children talk to us again. He says my family causes trouble in their lives.
- My kids seem to be carrying on the family tradition. My daughter married a real loser. They never have enough money, and to be honest, I just can't afford to keep supporting them too. Why doesn't he get a job and then keep it? I'm so frustrated. I want to be a good parent to my daughter, but the constant money problems cause problems between us. I wish I could just accept her husband, but I just can't. I'm sorry.
- Sunday is supposed to be a great family day, right? I never thought this would happen. My spouse told me last night that we need some space, as in a separation. What? I can't believe it. Of course, I'm not perfect, but no one is. Dear God, what can I do?
- I talked to my sponsor about the idea of taking inventory of my life. My sponsor pointed out that there is a kind of pattern to the feelings I have and that there are some things I need to talk to my bishop about. As I read back over my journal entries for the last few weeks, I see that I tend to feel sorry for myself. Some bad things have happened to me, sure, but I'm starting to see that when I turn myself over to the Lord, He can take away some of my pain. I don't have to keep using my addiction. I don't have the power to quit, but the Lord does have that power.
- The scriptures and words of the prophets are starting to make more sense to me now. I'm seeing how they apply to my life. I'm so much more aware of the character weaknesses that used to be invisible to me. Sometimes I

wonder if they are getting worse because I see them more clearly. I know I need to continue with the next steps so I can really recover.