
Ways to Keep a Writer's Notebook

What Notebooks Can Do for You

By Diana M. Raab

Do you admire writers who carry a notebook? Have you considered starting one? Do you find yourself writing ideas on scraps of paper or making lists on the backs of receipts? Well, it might be time for you to commit to keeping a notebook.

The role of keeping a notebook is to remind you that you are a writer. It's also a way of remaining in the moment and being present when ideas come to you. The renowned diary keeper Anais Nin said, "My ideas usually come not at my desk writing but in the midst of living." Think of your notebook as an image album or memory log, a place to record thoughts, events, sensations, dreams, revelations, and the wise words of others. Consider it a memory grabber to capture thoughts and events before they vanish from your radar.

Here are more reasons why a notebook is a powerful tool for the writer:

- It's a place to vent frustrations.
- It's a companion and best friend.
- It's a way to tap into your intuition.
- It increases your awareness of yourself and the world.
- It clears your mind.
- It builds self-confidence.
- It improves communication skills.
- It benefits mental health.
- It gives you a place to put your dreams and fantasies.
- It's a way to plan for the future.
- It's valuable for future generations.

Following are some tips to help you jump-start the art of keeping a notebook. These are merely suggestions. There really are no rules.

Some Basic Guidelines and Suggestions

- Gather tools. Choose a notebook that resonates with your personality and a pen that is comfortable in your hand. Many writers (including myself) prefer gel pens because they flow easily across the page. Some more artistic writers might prefer colored pens that reflect their mood. (My favorite pen writes in purple ink, and I recently learned that Virginia Woolf also loved writing in purple ink.)
- Date your entries. This is important because in the future, you may want to look back at your notebook to see how you were feeling on a particular day.
- Make writing a habit. Try to write at the same time and in the same place each day. It should be a time when you're free from interruptions. Anais Nin wrote at night. Virginia Woolf liked to write in the afternoon. Joan Didion prefers the morning hours. Figure out what time of day works best for you.
- Develop a centering ritual. Associate your writing time with another pleasurable act, such as burning a candle, listening to relaxing music, pouring a cup of coffee, meditating, or reading poetry.
- Put your inner critic and editor aside. In the journal, remember that grammar, spelling, and punctuation don't matter. Anais Nin deftly said, "The diary is a place where you don't have to worry about being perfect."
- Brag, exaggerate, be happy or sad. Your notebook is whatever you want it to be. You are free!
- Be as honest as possible. Let your gut reaction or intuition come forth. Reveal your deep emotional truth. Remember, your notebook is for your eyes only.
- Write deeply. The more energy you put into keeping a notebook, the more you will get out of it.
- When stuck, take a break. After writing for a while, if you don't have anything else to say, get up and go for a walk or get something to drink. Moving around changes your perspective.

- Emphasize process rather than product. Record what you see and feel. Don't think too long and hard about what you're writing or what you will be doing with it. Just keep the words flowing. Remain in the moment.

What to Write

The list of writing topics is endless. One tip is to write about the first thing that pops into your head. For example, what are you thinking about now? What's on your mind? What feels most vivid to you at the moment? Write the hot spots.

Keep writing and don't worry if one sentence does not logically lead into the next. Go with the flow of your thoughts. If you are led down a path that you'd rather not head down, instead of crossing out, just begin a new paragraph. This is a good way to "clear your throat."

Free writing is yet another way to kick-start writing. Try this: On the top of your page write: "Right now I am feeling like..." or "I need..." or "I want..." Now write for fifteen minutes without lifting your pen off the page.

Some other jump-start ideas include writing about something unusual you saw on your way home today or something you wonder about or something compelling in the news. Begin by writing about a universal message in the news and then see if it drives you to write about something more personal.

Memory and Notebooks

Memory is where we develop our individuality. How we remember, what we remember, and why we remember form the personal map of who we are. Our memories make us unique. Even if we have the same experience as someone else, each one of us will process the memory differently. It does not make one person wrong and the other right—just different.

Memories inspire us to write about certain things. Try to activate your memory by practicing the following writing exercises:

- Write "I remember" and then do some freewriting.
- Write about a transforming moment in your life.
- Write about your happiest and saddest moments.
- Describe a smell that brings back a powerful memory.
- Write about a song that elicits memories.
- Describe losing someone you really loved.
- Write about a strange family member. (We all have at least one. Some may look funny, act inappropriately, or can be embarrassing.)
- Write what you remember about sixth grade. Be specific.
- Write about a memory on a bicycle.
- Describe a memorable holiday.
- Write ten ways you felt different as a child.
- Visualize a place you love and use details when writing about it.

- Describe a grandparent.
- Write about books that have changed your life.

How to Dig Deeper

Writing from a deep place reveals your relationship with yourself. The more comfortable you are with yourself, the easier getting deeper will be. Chances are that after doing this, you will feel more calm and centered.

Digging deeper involves trusting your inner wisdom, intuition, and heart. This is how your true inner voice will emerge.

One way to go deeper is to reflect on some recent events in your life. This can help you get to the core of what you are feeling. Your words might take you somewhere else, and that's OK. Go with the flow. Remain in the moment.

Another way to go deeper into your own writing is to read a lot. "If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot. There's no way around these two things that I'm aware of, no shortcut," says Stephen King in his book *On Writing*.

It's a good idea to read the works of those you admire. Reading poetry also inspires creative thoughts. If you haven't found a favorite poet, I suggest you pick up an anthology, such as Garrison Keillor's anthology. Poets such as Billy Collins are very accessible because they write about everyday occurrences.

Listening is also a vital skill for the writer. Natalie Goldberg, in her book *Writing Down the Bones*, says, "Writing is ninety percent listening...you listen so deeply to the space around you that it fills you, and when you write, it pours out of you. If you can capture that reality around you, your writing needs nothing else. You don't only listen to the person speaking to you across the table but simultaneously try to listen to the air, the chair, and the door."

I hope these guidelines help you jump-start your own notebook. Remember, it's your place to be creative, so you can make it whatever you want it to be. Today's reflection and documentation can lead to tomorrow's published stories. So start today and enjoy!

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That's the Spirit

By Robert William Russell—Sarasota, FL

One should have a vintage cellar,
and it must be simply stellar;
to be as superb as it looks,
instead of wine, fill it with books.