

# Notebook Know-How

Strategies for the Writer's Notebook



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Foreword by Ralph Fletcher

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# Table of Contents



Foreword by Ralph Fletcher	vii
Acknowledgments	xi
Chapter 1: Why Notebooks?	I
Chapter 2: Launching the Notebook	9
Chapter 3: Kneading Notebooks: Expanding Topics and Building Collections of Ideas	35
Chapter 4: When Writers Read	55
Chapter 5: Using Notebooks to Understand Genre	75
Chapter 6: Writing Wrongs: Editing, Spelling, and Punctuation	95
Chapter 7: Assessing the Notebook	111
Appendix	
Considerations for Notebooks	127
Charting Author Style	128
Midyear Self-Evaluation	129
End-of-Year Self-Assessment	131



## Chapter 1:



# Why Notebooks?

It was September in Georgia, which means it was *still* hot. My fourth-grade students were filing into the classroom with their first writer's notebooks. The assignment: purchase a notebook that "calls to you"—that yearns for your words to be written down in it. If nothing calls and nothing yearns, then just pick one you like. Everyone must have a notebook for writing today.

As I observed students unpacking this soon-to-be treasure, I noticed that their reactions were as different as the colors in a box of crayons. Some students pulled it out of their backpacks with great drama—carefully taking it out, hugging it close to them, showing their friends, and finally setting it down on top of their desks. Others were much more casual—the notebook was stuck in the middle of a pile of last night's homework and awkwardly shoved in their desks.

Then there was Chance. Chance is a gifted student in all aspects. But he didn't enjoy writing. Although good at it, he saw it as a chore rather than something to enrich and improve his life.

"Where's your notebook?" the girl next to him asked.

"Oh yeah, I almost forgot," he replied while whipping it out of his back pocket. It was a small, pocket-sized spiral notebook, one that is often used for lists or reminders.

"You're going to write in *that*?" she asked, almost as if she were incredulous.

"Well, Ms. B. never said what size. This one caught my eye. I like it. It's small and won't take long to write a whole page. It's perfect."

Then the questions began: How long does an "entry" have to be to count as an assignment? How many of Chance's pages equal one of my pages? Can I get a new notebook like Chance's? How big do the notebooks have to be, Ms. B? I cringed. I hadn't thought about any notebook requirements. I thought the



students would . . . well, they would just *know* what I wanted. The fact is that in the beginning many children will not honor and cherish their notebooks just because I'm excited about them.

Fast-forward several years to another new school year. Two (of several) reasons I love my job are we get to start afresh each school year, and we get to use school supplies. I'm a maniac when it comes to supplies. I love shopping for pencils, markers, notebooks, and glue. Scanning the sales section of the Sunday paper beginning in July is like a challenge on *Survivor!* Can I hold out for the best deal and then grab it before anyone else does?

After my experience with Chance, I decided to purchase all the notebooks and folders required for each student. A local store was having a sale: ten spiral notebooks and folders for a dollar. It was a bargain shopper's dream, never mind a lover of school supplies. So I went in and scoured the boxes of notebooks and folders to color-coordinate subject notebooks with subject folders. As I pulled everything out of the cart for the checkout clerk, she commented, "What do you need all of this for?"

"They're for my kids," I replied without thinking.

With a look of shock mixed with horror she asked, "How many children do you have?!"

Still clueless as to why she would be shocked I said, "Twenty-five."

"Twenty-five children! They can't all be yours!"

I had to laugh as I explained they were my students. The clerk was amazed that I went to all of this trouble for them. I realized then that I was going to a lot of trouble to do too much for them. What else was I doing too much of? The answer came amazingly fast—I did too much of their writing. I said they could write about whatever they wanted, and then I continued to give topics to the students who "have nothing to write about." Instead of showing them how to find topics, I left it up to them to fly solo or I gave them ideas.

When I looked at the blank notebooks, my first thought was what am I going to get kids to put in these notebooks?

These inner conversations led me to a deeper study of writer's notebooks. Lucy Calkins and, more recently, Ralph Fletcher have written extensively about notebooks as a tool for prewriting. In *A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You* (1996a), Fletcher describes notebooks as his most important tool for living a writing kind of life. In *Breathing In, Breathing Out*

(1996b), Fletcher encourages readers: “Don’t be afraid to live like a writer. Writers explore. There are two whole universes for you to explore—the one on the inside, and the physical one on the outside. Take your choice; inner or outer. Or best: both” (p. 6).

A writer’s notebook gives students a place to write every day . . . to practice living like a writer. Anne Lamott’s father told her, “Writing . . . do it every day for a while. Do it as you would do scales on a piano. Do it by prearrangement with yourself. Do it as a debt of honor and make a commitment to finishing things” (Lamott 1994, p. xxii).

In her book *Something to Declare*, Julia Alvarez says, “The writing life is a life with all the windows and doors opened” (1999, p. 282). That’s what notebooks help students do: use the world around them—their own lives and perspectives—as a supply of writing ideas. Don Murray reflects on his notebook as a record of his thinking—a record of his intellectual life. Stephen King, in *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*, puts it bluntly: “If you want to be a writer, you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot” (2002, p. 145). Interview after interview, book after book, writers talk about having a place to write every day. For some it’s a computer, others a notepad, and still others a notebook. The concept is the same—to have a place just to write . . . a lot.

I was speaking to a group of fifth-grade teachers about writing. I was asked to come by this workshop because they were not convinced writing workshop was important. I began by asking how they worked writing into their day. Dead silence. I then asked, How many times do your students write each week? More silence. I continued. How many of you feel your students are prepared for the fifth-grade writing exam? All the hands went up. And so our conversation began. How do you do that? The answer, over and over again, was, We use prompts at least once a month. I then asked, How many of you continue using prompts after the writing exam? Half the hands went up. I cringed at the thought of my next question but asked it anyway: How many of you stop working on writing and focus on grammar or other subject areas after the exam? The other half of the hands went up.

Not only did I need to get these teachers to write daily with their students, but I had to convince them to do so without prompts and to continue writing after the midyear state exam. As our conversation continued and evolved, the same question kept coming up: How do you get students to write? If I don’t give them a topic, they just sit there.



Kids are amazingly manipulative. My four-year-old pulls this stunt—I'm ready to take him outside to play, but he needs to put on his shoes. He says he can't find them. I end up finding the shoes buried under toy cars. He then sits down on the floor with one foot up waiting for me to put them on for him so he can play. It occurred to me that I was working a lot harder than he was so that he could go play. It's the same with students and writing: If I'm working harder than they are on their writing, something is terribly wrong.

Don Murray said, "You won't know what you have to say until you write. Writing comes from paying attention." Red Smith writes, "Writing is easy. You sit at the typewriter and open a vein." O. Henry put it best: "Write what makes you happy." Not all writing is happy writing, but O. Henry is saying writing must come from us, not from a book of made-up prompts.

### Why Notebooks?

I sometimes wish I was the genius who invented the notebook. Think about it—it's just a bunch of paper (sometimes not even with lines), bound and with a cover. That's it. Paper, binding, cover. GENIUS! Everyone uses them for a thousand different things: grocery lists, math homework, class notes, price quotes, and so on. It's a very mundane item that has become an integral part of our world. If only I owned that patent . . .

For a writer, the right combination of words, the perfect setting, or the solution to writer's block can come at any time in any place. It's important to have a place to record these bits of life that may serve to inspire further work. That place for us is a writer's notebook.

Writer's notebooks have been written about extensively and called by many different names: scrapbooks, life books, journals, and day books. It's not the name that unifies these but rather the principle behind their use. A writer's notebook creates a place for students (and writers) to save their words—in the form of a memory, a reflection, a list, a rambling of thoughts, a sketch, or even a scrap of print taped on the page. A notebook can become whatever the writer makes it to be. As teachers, we can guide its use, present strategies, and even mandate entries if we wish. If the notebook is to be a useful tool,

however, it must be useful to the writer first, and the reader (teacher) second. Because in the long run, the creation of each notebook, each time, is in the hands of the writer.

Teachers often ask me, but what's the point? What am I trying to accomplish with this task? Why is it worthy of so much time every day? Not only are these fair questions, these are questions we should be asking ourselves constantly, every day. With increased curriculum mandates, test pressures, and stagnant school hours, I'm picky and protective of my class time. Writer's notebooks help me maximize the effects of my writing lessons.

A fifth-grade teacher and I were talking about this in the hallway one day. She finally said to me, "I don't need to use notebooks because my kids already write every day."

"Really? How do you accomplish that?" I asked, truly interested.

"Well, they write the answers, in complete sentences, to the questions at the end of each reading story, social studies chapter, and science section," she responded, quite proudly.

"Hmm," was my intelligent response. While inside my head I was shouting, "That doesn't count! That's not what people mean when they say write every day!"

Children's author and educator Lester Laminack visited our school and told the students he was a writerrrrr. He writes every day, and I guarantee you *not* by answering questions in a textbook. My students echoed this sentiment in the weeks that passed as we wrote; I would hear whispers of, it's time to be a writerrrr. We write every day.

The purpose of a notebook is to provide a place for students to practice writing. It's a place for them to generate text, find ideas, and practice what they know about spelling and grammar. As I have worked with notebooks over the years, I have chosen to use some arbitrary sections that help me organize my thinking within the notebook.

From the beginning of the notebook, I teach my students to practice generating text by using different writing strategies. I rely on some tried-and-true strategies, as well as on the work of writers like Natalie Goldberg, Georgia Heard, Ralph Fletcher, and Anne Lamott.



## Building Fluency to Find Significance

*Where do people who write acquire all the knowledge they need? The conclusion I reached . . . it could only be through reading.* —Frank Smith, Joining the Literacy Club

Katie Wood Ray (1996) writes about reading like a writer to improve writing craft. Constance Weaver (2002) has said, for every minute we spend reading, we spend a minute learning about writing and spelling. It's a connection not to be ignored.

One of the biggest pushes in the early primary years is to create reading fluency. Reading fluency is an important skill, not only for reading aloud, but also for reading comprehension. The reading specialist at our school, Cheri Carter, refers to the difference between reading fluency and reading word-for-word as the difference between spreading butter and margarine on a piece of bread. When spreading butter, the bread often tears and the butter is lumped in places on the bread. Margarine goes on smoothly, not tearing the bread, and covers the piece evenly.

I began to realize that writing fluency is equally important for writers. Being able to think and write at the same time—getting words on a page, writing a paragraph, a page, or even a couple of pages in one writer's workshop—is an important skill for students to develop. When children are thinking they are less likely to forget what they want to say. Fluency is the ability to generate text—a lot of it—in a short period of time. This gives students something to work with when it comes to rereading, revising, and even editing. As Lucy Calkins writes: “I write to hold what I find in my life in my hands and to declare it a treasure . . . significance cannot be found, it must be grown” (1988, p. 4).

Vicki Vinton says, “It is an illusion that writers live more significant lives than nonwriters; the truth is, writers are just more in the habit of finding the significance that there is in their lives” (Calkins 1988, p. 4).

These are powerful statements offered by Lucy Calkins, who is the kind of teacher I want to be. But statements like these often led me to feel like a failure when it came to keeping notebooks. When I first started keeping my own writer's notebook, it was filled with a lot of . . . nothing. Oh, there were words there, a lot of them, but in the first third of the notebook I wrote nothing of significance. Or so it seemed.



I began to worry that I would never be a true writer. So I worked to create the habit of writing. I was writing every day, whether or not I had something “worthy” to say. I studied books about writing and tried the different strategies other authors suggested for practice. I revisited strategies I liked, and dumped the ones I didn’t. It got easier and easier to fill the pages of this once-blank notebook. I was creating my own way of writing in the notebook, growing further and further away from the crutch of a diary-like entry or the familiar yearning for a prompt.

And as I filled my notebook, something significant began to happen. I was learning to write fluently—to get text down on paper in order to go back to it. I was rereading, reflecting, and writing some more. I discovered my own ideas and things I wanted to dwell on in my notebook.

When I think about my most reluctant writers, I realize they are the ones who don’t write fluently. They have trouble thinking of what to write, or how much to write, or they forget what they wanted to write. From my experiences—and from those of writers everywhere—the most important aspect of a notebook is that it allows students the practice of simply writing . . . in whatever form. Writing, writing, writing . . .

I now realize what writers have been trying to tell us “nonwriters”—that we shouldn’t write for significance, but rather that we should write as a habit. Sometimes we’ll write something significant and sometimes we won’t. It’s the *act* of writing—the practice of generating text and building fluency—that leads writers to significance.

Keeping a notebook isn’t something you “get.” It’s not a science, there is no one right way. Keeping a notebook is a process. It’s something that “gets” you—leads you from one thought to another until you, too, experience the writer’s joy of discovering something you didn’t know you knew.

