



The Writer's Notebook A High Leverage Practice for Uncertain Times

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"We don't teach our students to write so much as create a safe space where they can teach themselves by doing."

Ralph Fletcher

School as we know it has undergone sweeping changes in response to COVID-19. We were faced with teaching remotely and maintaining virtual connections with our students. Parents, with no prior knowledge or preparation, were thrust into providing "crisis schooling," on top of managing all of the adult stressors that come with a pandemic. Our children have been expected to learn in different ways without access to the myriad of resources that may be available to them when school is open. It is a time that has tested all we thought we knew about education, and has often left us feeling overwhelmed and uncertain.

We are also negotiating a number of external pressures- everything from the varying expectations from parents in the school community to the images of perfection we see portrayed on social media. It seems as if technology is at the forefront of all conversations, however in the back of our minds we grapple with issues of equity and access for all of our students. It's a perfect time to take a collective breath and think about high leverage tools with endless possibilities for our students. **A tool where access is never an issue and the likelihood of engagement is high is the Writer's Notebook.**

What is a Writer's Notebook?

A **Writer's Notebook** is a tool for helping our students grow into lifelong writers. It is where students capture observations, reactions, ideas, questions, memories, quotes, sketches, lists, or snippets of language. It is a place to experiment, collect, and hold on to thinking.



A **Writer's Notebook** is like a tide pool, teeming with life, and full of unexpected treasures. It is NOT a diary where the writer retells events from his/her life, nor is it a reading journal where the writer would summarize or react to texts he/she has read. According to Ralph Fletcher in his book **A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer** Within You, "A writer's notebook gives you a place to live like a writer." He goes on to say "When you come right down to it, a writer's notebook is nothing more than a blank book, but within those pages you've got a powerful tool for writing and living."

Why Keep a Writer's Notebook? Better Yet, Why NOW?

A **Writer's Notebook** is a tool, a motivational tool, to get our children living like writers. The entries can be a multitude of genres (poetry, informational writing, argument writing, narrative writing), and the writer is empowered to make the decisions about what goes into the notebook. It is unique and personal. There are no minimum writing requirements, no editing corrections, or scoring rubrics. It is a safe place to experiment, reflect, and grow as a writer. Ultimately, a writer's notebook is a place that holds the inspiration for lengthier writing endeavors in the future.

The **Writer's Notebook** is also a tool for helping our students write fluently and gain stamina as writers. Many of our students struggle to both think and write at the same time. They might lose their ideas or struggle with ways to capture them on paper. A **Writer's Notebook** is not only a tool, but a process, where each time they write, our students are strengthening their skills as writers.

Given the events in our world today, what better time than now to capture our thinking, reactions, stories of inspiration, and questions. A **Writer's Notebook** authored during a global pandemic and a period of civil unrest will undoubtedly later serve as a primary source document. Imagine the power of your students capturing this period in history- or you for that matter!

What are the BENEFITS of Paper and Pencil Writer's Notebooks?

In this day and age with so much online, it may seem counter intuitive to keep a paper and pencil notebook. However, the power of the writer's notebook comes from the fact that it is pencil (or pen) to paper! Here are some benefits:

- Writing in a paper notebook is inexpensive and accessible to everyone.
- The writer's notebook is aligned with the writer's preferences. For example, the style of the notebook, whether it is softcover or hard cover, lined or unlined, large or small.
- It can be personalized on both the inside and the outside.
- It is a preserved place where sacred thoughts and ideas cannot be deleted.
- It is free of rules with no "spell check," and it allows the author to experiment with different types of writing utensils and color.
- Writing by hand is not only a valuable skill for our students, but it unlocks thinking in a safe way.
- Writing in a paper notebook is inexpensive and accessible to everyone.



What Goes into a Writer's Notebook?

There are a myriad of things that can be included in a **Writer's Notebook**. Ultimately, it is up to the writer to decide what to include in the notebook, as it should reflect his/her personality. Listed below are suggested ideas for writer's notebooks. Not every writer will use every idea on the list, but it gives a great starting point!

Entry Ideas for Writer's Notebooks

- Inspirational stories
- Burning questions
- Thought-provoking quotes
- Topics for future writing
- Lists
- Favorite/Intriguing words or snippets of language
- Poems
- Excerpts from books or lines of poetry
- Artifacts; newspaper clippings, ticket stubs, photographs
- Descriptions
- Observations
- Celebrations
- Drawings, doodles, or diagrams
- Feelings/emotions
- Letters

How Do I Launch Writer's Notebooks?

In the book ***Notebook Know-How: Strategies for the Writer's Notebook***, author Aimee Buckner devotes an entire chapter to launching the notebook. A few of my favorites are:

History of a Name

Students write an entry telling the story of their name. It may be where their name came from, who named them, or why their name is special. As principal, I will very often ask children to tell me the story of their name. The responses are amazing! One of my student's has a name meaning "resplendence," another's name means "victory" because her mother had tried so long to have a child, and another child was proud of his middle name, which was after his grandfather. This strategy is not only a great way to get students writing, but it also engages families and helps you to get to know your students.

Writing from a List

Writing lists is a very low stakes way to engage students in writing. At the start, the teacher will want to initiate topics for lists, however in time, students should be able to start lists on their own! An important thing to remember about lists is that they can become fodder for future writing pieces. Some list ideas that I have used successfully with student:

- Life changing moments
- "Favorites" (ie. places, people, things, etc.)



- Embarrassing moments
- Inspirational authors/song artists/celebrities/athletes
- Things you dread
- Sad times
- World issues
- Topics of interest
- Wishes

Questions

The **Writer's Notebook** is a place for students to capture the things that make them wonder the most. Students can leave their “burning questions” in their notebooks and free their minds to ponder the answers. We want our students to be curious about the world around them, and asking questions is a great way to do that. Some simple questions starters help (Why? What if? How? When?), as well as modeling for students the way we, as adults, view the world. Over the years, here are some of the questions my students have asked in their writer's notebooks:

- What would our oceans be like if everyone stopped using plastic?
- How does my mom's Yedi keep her coffee hot all day?
- What will school be like in the fall?
- How does bug spray work?
- What do you need to build a treehouse?
- Why are people treated differently because on their gender or the color of their skin?

Observations

We should teach our students to notice the world around them. They should notice the small things and find wonder in every day. To prompt student writing about observations, encourage them to use their five senses when observing things they see. For example, students can write about different bird's behaviors at the bird feeder, the ways we know a storm is coming, how they feel when they experience different smells in the kitchen, or the noises they still here even when the room they are in is “quiet.”

Useful Guidelines for Writer's Notebooks

- Choose a notebook that is large enough to capture your best thinking (no smaller than 4” x 6”).
- Personalize your notebook and make it a reflection of your own unique self.
- Write in your notebook every day.
- Live like a writer, on the constant lookout for ideas and inspiration.
- Take care of your notebook; keep it close and be gentle with its pages.
- Keep all pages of your notebook intact.
- Instead of erasing, use a single line to cross out.
- Number the pages.
- Date each entry and give it a title so it is easy to find.
- Make it a habit to re-read your notebook every so often!



Writer's Notebooks have relevance for everyone, no matter the age. They empower writers through choice, motivate writers through creativity, and engage writer's through big ideas. It is amazing to think that a simple notebook can hold world-changing ideas, inspiration for future research and writing projects, or memories of a unique and challenging time in our history.

Resources and References

This site, co-founded by Stacey Shubitz and Ruth Ayres, is a widely followed blog solely devoted to the teaching of writing. A talented team of co-authors write about writer's notebooks. Three of the blogs are highlighted below.

<https://twowritingteachers.org/category/writers-notebook/>

Engage Striving Writers by Keeping A Notebook During the COVID-19 School Closures by Stacey Shubitz

<https://twowritingteachers.org/2020/04/15/keepinganotebook/>

Six Ways to Keep the Energy of Writer's Notebooks Alive All Year Long by Stacey Shubitz

<https://twowritingteachers.org/2018/11/05/notebookenergy/>

Journal Writing Strategies While Living Through A Pandemic by Therapi Kapl

<https://twowritingteachers.org/2020/05/21/journal-writing-strategies-while-living-through-a-pandemic/>

Amy Ludwig VanDerwater posted a series entitled "***Keeping a Notebook.***" The series includes brief daily writing talks designed to engage students in writer's notebooks.

www.sharingournotebooks.amylv.com/2020/03/keeping-notebooktogether.html

Buckner, Aimee. ***Notebook Know-How: Strategies for the Writer's Notebook.*** Portland: Stenhouse Publishers, 2005.

Fletcher, Ralph. ***Joy Write: Cultivating High-Impact, Low Stakes Writing.*** Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2017.

_____. ***A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You.*** New York: Harper Trophy, 1996.

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<https://justaskpublications.com/msca/>

