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# Is It A Diary? A Journal? —No, It's a Writer's Notebook!

Frances B. Oleson

"Notebooks alone won't change habits of life. . . . But tools of the hand can become tools of the mind. What is at first done in concrete, active, and interactive ways can often be done later abstractly and alone" (57).

-Lucy McCormick Calkins from *Living Between the Lines*

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After a few years of bombarding my students with everything I've taken in at the annual Michigan Reading Association (MRA) conferences, I promised them and myself that this year I would focus my attention on one or maybe two ideas. Thanks to Judy O'Brien, Nancie Atwell, Smokey Daniels, and Ralph Fletcher, I found what I wanted for my kids—the writer's notebook.

I met Judy at one of my first MRA conferences when she conducted a session on the writer's workshop based on Nancie Atwell's and Lucy McCormick Calkins' models. The concept hooked me, and I became a great admirer of all three women.

Nancie Atwell's book *In the Middle* was my bible when I initiated the workshop in my classroom. I would read sections to my students as mini-lessons until we felt comfortable with the philosophy. The opportunity to listen to her in person thrilled me. During her 1999 MRA session entitled "The Teacher's Role in the Writing Workshop," Atwell used the analogy of a good parent demonstrating to her young child the correct procedure to brush her teeth. She encouraged writing teachers to show the same patience with their students—allow students to explore on their own but interject one's experiences and knowledge to help them. She also encouraged teachers to explain, demonstrate, and work together with their students.

Another influential author at the conference was Ralph Fletcher, whose session, "The Writer's Notebook: New Horizons for our Writers," opened my eyes to new possibilities. Moved by his passion for writing and for children to be writers, I listened intently. He introduced me to the concept of the writer's notebook. As he read from children's notebooks, I found myself wiping tears from my eyes. These kids were invested in their writing. Not just writing, they were invested in life. They were not writing just for the teacher but for themselves and for the world. Ralph Fletcher explained that the writer's notebook could be a "powerful tool" for kids. "It provides a safe place to play with an idea before

going public with it. A place to live like a writer, not just in school during writing time, but wherever they are, at any time of the day" (MRA 1999).

Trained in the Montessori philosophy and working in a Montessori school, I saw how the "concreteness" of a notebook could help my students investigate the vastness of life. This is what I wanted for my kids. That is what I brought back to them.

## The What? -Writer's Notebook

Notebooks have been, for me and for my students with whom I work, an invitation to generate entries, notes, lists, drafts, observations, ramblings on a million of topics and on no particular topic at all. (Calkins 38)

Ralph Fletcher compares the writer's notebook to a ditch he dug near the edge of the woods when he was a young boy. The next morning he discovered his ditch crawling with a number of small creatures: frogs, toads, and even a turtle. A writer's notebook is similar to that ditch, "an empty space you dig in your busy life, a space that will fill up with all sorts of fascinating little creatures" (2).

Randy Bomer likens the writer's notebook to the sketchbooks artists carry around with them in case they see something they want to remember and use later in a piece of work. The sketchbook also reminds the artist to observe more closely, to look at things they might otherwise ignore. "In some ways a writer's notebook works in the same way. They collect things in their notebook, things from their lives . . . [It is] a tool to help my students collect data about their lives and to begin to reach for meaning in advance of writing a draft" (47). Shelley Harwayne likes to have her "students use their notebook as a container" (61) for their thoughts and writings. Whether you compare it to a ditch, sketchbook, or a container, one thing a writer's notebook is not: a writer's notebook is not a diary or a daily journal.

Students need to see the difference between

a notebook and diary or daily journal, especially in a classroom like mine where the students are responsible for a daily journal. Journals summarize their daily life. My students tend to give the bare facts once a day. "It seemed that journals and diaries are ends in themselves—you write in your journal in order to have written in your journal and in order to benefit from that thinking" (Bomer 40). The writer's notebook, in contrast, works as a resource for further writing.

As I read and listen to experts share their experiences with the writer's notebook, I realize the notebook is a safe place for a writer to explore and try new things. It is a place for thinking through issues, a place for memories, a place for reflection, a place for wonderings, a place for wordplay, and a place for trying different voices and techniques (Bomer, Fletcher, Calkins).

"Keeping a notebook," Fletcher explains, "can help kids pay closer attention to their world, incubate 'seed ideas,' and collect important artifacts, memories, snippets of talk, for future writing projects" (MRA 1999). Writer's notebooks provide a place to jot thoughts that occur to the students and to record what they see. The students may use them as a place to copy passages they read or to write down funny or interesting or beautiful things they hear people say. The students can collect artifacts in their notebooks like photographs or news articles or the first violet of spring. The writer's notebook, as Bomer writes, "is like the box you used to have that contained your treasures, the things in your life that meant the most" (48).

Thus, writer's notebooks are used to gather vital bits and pieces of writing for possible use in a later piece of writing. They can be a rehearsal for major pieces of writing to revise at a later date. The entries are "not traditional stories with beginnings, middles, and endings" (Harwayne 61), but "seeds" for future writings. The ideas can come from everywhere: family stories, haunting images, overheard conversations, firsthand experiences, or responses to movies, museums, social studies lessons, novels, etc. (Bomer, Calkins, Fletcher, Harwayne).

### **Writer's Notebook-Why?**

Nothing magical happens simply because youngsters bring notebooks to school. Notebooks can be just another place for writing, or they can represent a new way of thinking about the writing process. The most obvious way in which notebooks have altered my views of writing is that they have served as a concrete, physical invitation to write . . . (Calkins 37-38)

Many of the authors my students and I en-

joy have used notebooks of some sort to gather ideas for their books. Henry James, Dickens, Steinbeck, Oates, Woolf, Maurice Sendack, Ursula LeGuinn, Donald Murray, and Norman Mailer are just a few who have used a notebook. Even Beethoven used a notebook for musical ideas (Bomer, Calkins, Harwayne). My students and I look at ourselves differently now since using the notebook. We see ourselves in a new light as real authors.

Ralph Fletcher put me in touch with a third-grade teacher in Bayville, New York who has used writer's notebooks for years. Lynn Hersch answered my question about her purpose in using writer's notebooks: "I started using notebooks because it made sense. I saw a need. Kids were writing the same stories year after year—partly because they thought they only had a few 'worthy' stories to tell, partly because teachers were assigning topics to them and that's what they were used to. Writing wasn't, for them, discovery or inquiry, it was 'get it done for the teacher'."

I had been seeing this in my students: a lack of importance in their writing and a reflection of the attitude that, "I'll do it because I gotta." I wanted so much more for my kids. I wanted them to experience the whole world, but what an abstract concept for kids—for adults. With the notebook in their hands, I hoped I could set a habit that will later become a natural part of their daily lives, the habit of noticing the ordinary as well as the extraordinary, of noticing the ant carrying away that breadcrumb and wondering how, of smelling the rainstorm brewing, of listening to melting snow, of tasting a rainbow, of experiencing life all around us and writing about it.

Hersch had similar purposes for the notebook: "The main purposes of the notebook for me are many: changing the way a writer looks at the world and his/her experiences, validating the importance of moments, recording personal history, couraging self reflection—collecting these 'scraps of life' for later enjoyment, to read as 'sparks' for deeper consideration, to read and search for threads (patterns) in one's thinking, to read to find something with potential as a writing project that really matters."

"The important thing," Calkins writes, "is that we let those notebooks help us lead more wide-awake lives" (42). They are not journals, nor are they collections of the same rough drafts the students would usually keep in their writing folders (50). I have seen this in my students' writing. One student had her notebook at home and wrote in front of the living room fire. Corine shared her entry with us. She wrote about the warmth of the fire and the coziness of reading a book and how it reminded her of her grandmother. Gunnar wrote

during his spring break. His entry described his excitement when he caught a deep-sea fish but how the joy left him as he watched the fish struggle and gasp for air. Another student, KayLeah, told us she wrote in the notebook while watching TV. I was speechless after she shared.

The notebooks have replaced our daily writing folders and daily rough drafts. Another e-mail correspondent provided by Fletcher—Franki Sibberson of Dublin, Ohio—teaches third grade and has used notebooks for eight years. She cautioned me that the children do not publish more as a result of using a writer's notebook, but they are writing a great deal more. This is what I am observing, and I am thrilled.

### **3-2-1-Blastoff-Launching it**

I usually introduce notebooks by sharing my notebook with the kids, flipping through, showing various entries. I also share books like *Amelia's Notebook*, and other journal type books to show various ways writers keep notebooks. (Sibberson)

The way to launch the notebook needs to suit the style of the teacher and the students. Bomer, who works with older students, chooses to start with stories. He asks his students if they ever sit around with their friends and one person is telling a story when halfway through, another friend sits up because that story reminds him of a story. He waits until the one friend is done, so he can tell his story. Bomer challenges his students to see if his story reminds them of a story. He tells his story and then breaks his class up into smaller groups so everyone can share. After five or ten minutes, he brings them back and has them write in their writer's notebooks. The students write stories they have previously shared or something they had not said. He instructs them to write fast and to let whatever they think take shape on the paper. Bomer writes along with them. That is all he does the first day because he does not want to "muddy things with explanations about how to keep a notebook." Keep it simple the first day and "try not to say too much at once" (48).

Harwayne introduces the writer's notebook with literature; her book offers a wonderful bibliography of children's literature. At the beginning of the school year she has at least three stacks of children's literature. The first is a stack of books about family. The second stack of books deals with an object that is special to the main character. The third stack of books prompts talks about memories that may haunt the main characters. After reading from one of the stacks, Harwayne may share her stories or special objects or memories that haunt her. The children also share, and the room is full of

talk. Harwayne comments to the students that their lives are so interesting, and they have so many important things to say, that they must have a place to record their ideas. She explains that the writer's notebook is a place for these wonderful memories, stories, or objects to be stored (128).

Hersch shares her own notebook with the students. They talk about what kinds of entries she writes, how she enjoys reading back through it and learning how she has changed. She talks about celebrating "small moments," noticing instead of overlooking, slowing down.

Since I was a novice at launching a writer's notebook, I used Ralph Fletcher's book, *A Writer's Notebook: Unlocking the Writer Within You* to introduce my kids to the idea of the notebook. Ralph wrote the book for kids, so when the weather is cooperative, we go out and read a chapter and discuss. At the same time, we share entries that depict different kinds of writing: stories, conversations, description, wonder. Ralph's book contains many samples of different types of notebook entries, and I have found it an invaluable tool as a model for my students.

### **Keep it Rolling-Activities**

Literature can help to introduce the entire notion of keeping a writer's notebook, but it can also be used throughout the year to enrich students' notebook jottings. (Harwayne 128)

Harwayne continues to create book stacks throughout the year that will lead to "automatic talking," so the children can relate immediately to the literature. She recommends that teachers develop stacks of books that discuss dreams, friends, and feelings such as loneliness, fright, or jealousy. She likes sharing books with her students where the main character keeps a notebook or is examining his life, and she invites her students to do the same. Harwayne shares texts in order to improve the quality of students' notebook jottings (128-30). Calkins recommends mini-lessons to help students learn to use the notebooks. Mini-lessons on describing a scene, discussing an excerpted line from a story, interviewing an authority, exploring a puzzling thought, listing questions, searching the newspaper, or copying quotations from books would be valuable. In later mini-lessons, Calkins will help her students see how entries can be used for possible stories (45-48).

Bomer also presents a whole range of choices to his students. He introduces freewriting early in the year. He wants his students to learn that to write they don't always have to come up with a topic first. Along with freewriting, he likes his students

to write for a long time about some single object. He models orally by using an eraser as a topic and then sends his students out to find an object and helps them to see it with “fresh eyes.” He plays a guessing game with the class by reading only the object’s description and having the class guess what it is (52).

Bomer also instructs his class to go out into the hallways of the school to spy and write down what they saw and heard in their notebooks. Bomer will catalogue some different types of entries and post the list on the wall for a few days to encourage more writing in their notebooks. A nice list may be found in his book (54).

### **School’s Out-Where’s the Notebook?**

When writers carry notebooks everywhere, the notebooks nudge us to pay attention to the little moments that normally only flicker into our consciousness. (Calkins 43)

It is important to boost the use of the notebook outside the classroom. The students do not automatically or accidentally take it with them. They will need to be encouraged to carry it around with them all day and to write frequently at home and other places (Calkins, Fletcher, Harwayne).

Bomer discovered his students were not using their notebooks outside the classroom, so he assigned entries for homework. He required his high school class to have at least five entries a week, two of which had to be at least a page long, and the student was to spend at least half an hour on the writing (Bomer 54-55).

The notebook as an assignment is a touchy topic. Franki Sibberson realizes using it outside the classroom is important, but she does not mandate it because she does not want it to become unnatural. She often celebrates and allows kids to share things they added when they were not in school. She finds that is a successful way for outside writing to catch on. Lynn Hersch, on the other hand, assigns entries as homework. She does not give topics, but does suggest that the students write after doing their reading because it will sometimes spark an idea. Lucy Calkins uses share time for students who have written outside of class, so they can compare their writings at home with their writings at school (Calkins 49).

I want to be sure my kids are using their notebooks outside the classroom, so I take them outside the classroom. We will go down to a field close to the school and spend time talking and writing. I will also look through their notebooks, and if I see only a few entries that were written outside the classroom, I will then assign it as homework. I

want it to become a habit with the kids, and if it takes a little nudging from me, then so be it. I still have to remind my twelve-year-old to brush her teeth.

### **OK, Now What?-Reread and Reflect**

The revision process most of us know best—rethink the lead, adding and clarifying information, tightening loose sections—is usually only appropriate after writers have lived with a topic for awhile, written their way into it, and used all this living and writing to create a draft. (Calkins 63-64)

After a week or two of using the notebook, the students are invited to read the whole notebook frequently. At this time, they may begin starring their favorite entries, underlining key words, and highlighting interesting phrases. The students may write new thoughts in dialogue with themselves in the white space on facing pages. A mini-lesson may be given to introduce the new habit of saving white space for such purposes. Rereading may be a strategy for writing a new entry. They may begin to predict what a certain entry might become—a poem, letter, or story (Calkins, Fletcher, Bomer).

Once the students are comfortable with rereading their notebooks, the teacher needs to guide them through the art of reflection. Children need to listen to themselves—to “pause and make meaning from bits of their lives” (Calkins 56). The teacher models the “process of lingering with one’s notebook entries—in order to make important aspects of writing more concrete and more inviting for students” (Calkins 56). Calkins suggests one day a month using the entire workshop for rereading and reflecting. “Encourage the young writers to reread selections that may surprise them—trouble them and suggest they spend more attention with those entries. Have them look for entries that really matter to them, to discover feelings they didn’t know were there” (57).

Students reread their notebooks to find recurring themes. They could begin drawing arrows between related entries. They begin to search for a seed for a longer writing project. They read and reread for that paragraph or phrase that feels alive to them. Individual conferences may be needed to help guide writers to see similarities between their entries. Once a student finds a topic, he or she takes time to live with it and devote additional entries to the theme (Bomer, Calkins).

### **Do They Ever Revise?-Project**

In this crucial move from notebooks to projects, things get harder and harder the more you delay and discuss; you just have

to do it. (Bomer 69)

Calkins writes that when children keep a notebook, the topic choice no longer has to be conjured up. It is the choosing of a topic that then feels important and promising. Our responsibility as teachers is to aid the student in seeing the connections between entries. Have the student write more entries about the topic and move on to a rough draft (73-74).

This is all fine and good, but what about the teacher with no experience at finding a topic from a student's writer's notebook. Bomer helps with a nice table in his book. He has it laid out as an "If I see this . . . I might ask this . . ." outline.

Bomer recommends once the student is committed to a topic, the student write immediately a page or so about the topic. It is at this time the notebook takes on a new character. Bomer compares it to a "workbench for pieces of writing as yet half-conceived and unassembled" (70). Now the students' notebooks moved from being about everything to being about one thing. Bomer still encourages "variety and playfulness" but only about that one topic (70). This is the point where I see the writing process turn back into a more typical workshop with revising, editing, and publishing.

#### **A, B, C,-Assessment**

The purpose of the grading was not to instruct but to answer the school system's requirements. I wanted the kids to learn from my teaching and their work, not my grading . . . (Bomer 61)

Franki Sibberson and Lynn Hersch do not grade their students' notebooks. Sometimes Sibberson acknowledges students trying a new technique in their notebooks. She does expect the children to write in their notebooks during writing time and to have a variety of entries. The final writing projects originate from the students' notebooks, and they are graded (1999).

Bomer evaluates on the volume, variety, and thoughtfulness of the entries. He sets up a rotation system so that he sees every student's notebook once every two weeks. He never writes in them but uses sticky notes to make comments to his students (61).

Grading is an issue each teacher will have to handle according to his or her own style and requirements. Calkins advises us to learn more about the students as we look through their notebooks, and at the same time to assess ourselves as teachers. If we are seeing a pattern throughout our students' notebooks, such as the same story starters or similar topics, it may be that there is too much influence from the teacher (90).

#### **Too Good to be True-Problems**

In fact, at the beginning, many of the notebooks seemed atrocious when I judged them against my high expectations, and I was depressed and discouraged and again convinced I was the worst teacher in the world. (Bomer 59)

Hersch advises me to take "Baby steps!" She reminds me it will take time like any new endeavor. She encourages me to read, learn, try, fail, reflect, and read some more. She also reminds me that each year will be different. Some will be better than others, some with different emphasis, and some with different levels of success.

Calkins warns teachers not to become so enchanted with the notebook entries, the rereading and reflection, that we stop the writing process and do not move on to the projects. If this is the case, there is no real writers' workshop occurring (90).

Bomer's problems have been students abandoning topics, rushing through their first drafts, which they saw often as final drafts, or merely copying entries for their first drafts. He also has experienced students who chose superficial entries, or their drafts were more poorly written than their notebooks (75-76).

Bomer recommends four footholds to avoid some problems:

1. Every student has to complete a project by the deadline.
2. The teacher is not the author of all these pieces of writing. What is most important is the student's experience of the writing process.
3. The teacher should keep the standards low for the first project.
4. The teacher should hunt for ways to keep the notebook a valuable tool throughout the process of collecting, drafting, and revising. (76)

#### **Well, What Do You Think?-Conclusion**

Writing is lifework, not deskwork. (Calkins 71)

It is five months and a new school year since the MRA conference. My students and I have our writer's notebooks in hand. Their entries have amazed me with their candor and soul searching. I am sensing the same feeling with my students' writing that I did that afternoon at the MRA conference with Ralph Fletcher. They are writing for themselves, not just for me. I know the notebook is working and the students are invested when I observe a group of them huddled together on the couch sharing their entries. On this day they are sharing notes they wrote during a reading session with their five-year-old reading buddies. I smile as they read quotes from their smaller counterparts—and hold back a tear.

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## About the Author

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